











**THE FLESH  
IN THE  
M I R R O R**





FELICIEN MARCEAU

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THE FLESH  
IN THE  
MIRROR

*translated from the French by*  
MARGARET CROSLAND

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**MCMIII**

# CHAPTER 1

HE WOKE UP AS FIT AS A FIDDLE. That's where I started from. That's the breach through which everything went. Everything—up to the tragedy—and the rest. The keyphrase. The phrase which allowed me to see clearly. To find the pretence. Without it I'd still be there. I don't know where, like a fool. Shut out, thrown out, alone in fact. Alone and perplexed, alone and desperate before a world which for me was as closed up as an egg. Understanding nothing. Believing that. Fit as a fiddle. The next day, I woke up as fit as a fiddle. Everywhere. The people who speak to you, the people in the tube, the newspapers. AS THOUGH EVERYBODY WOKE UP AS FIT AS A FIDDLE. As though it was frequent, normal, natural. Isn't it? Because when you come across a phrase so often you're forced to think that it means nothing exceptional or curious. Fine.

Now the thing about me is, I'VE NEVER WOKEN UP AS FIT AS A FIDDLE. Never. How do other people wake up? Fit as a fiddle. If they talk about it so much it must happen to them. It's never happened to me. I have taken notice, though. I imagine it began to worry me in the end. I said to myself, it isn't possible. So then I watched myself. I can even say that I tried hard. I ignored sores, spots and mosquito bites. What I would call accidents. And in fact I NEVER woke up as fit as a fiddle. Rested, yes. Or after I'd washed perhaps. But not when I woke up. NOT WHEN I WOKE UP. It's not that it's very serious, no, I'm not ill, I haven't got a temperature, but I feel heavy, my legs ache. My thighs especially, inside. It hurts me. Or behind my eyes. Above my eyelids. The shoulders.

The shoulder blades. I feel as though my arteries were made of lead. Rust, embarrassment, a nasty taste in my mouth. I emerge with difficulty. In short, one day, everything considered, I had to make up my mind. In this world where everyone wakes up as fit as a fiddle, I woke up differently. With a different description. Other people: as fit as a fiddle. On the opposite side: me. The exception. The one and only. Me all alone with something that had been refused, forbidden. Why? The world's like an egg, a smooth brilliant egg, full of men who are as fit as a fiddle. And I'm outside the egg. I alone. Me buried in this unbelievable body which was neither fit nor fiddle-like. And why?

At first I came to the conclusion that I must be different from other people. That I must be exceptional. Good God! I thought my health was bad. But Cassagne didn't take me seriously.

"Magis, my friend, I've told you so already. You're an imaginary invalid. A nervous type."

"But, sir."

Other people say 'doctor', just like that. I can't. I've tried. It won't come out. The one word 'doctor'; it's as though it just won't form in my mouth. Then I stammer. Or I say 'sir'. Furious. Then I reproach myself. What do other people do? They're always at their ease. As though they were at home. I'm never at ease. I never feel at home. It's true that Cassagne is much older than me. And that he looked after me even when I was a little boy and we lived in the rue du Borrégo. But mother was about the same age as he was. And she also said 'sir'. Wiping her hands on her apron. That was her. She was always wiping her hands. It was a habit. When she spoke. And when she took down the prescription, she started again, but at the top of her apron, against her breasts. 'Yes, sir'. She was standing, he sitting as though it was he

who was paying. And when he was expected she cleaned everything and tidied up.

"The doctor will be coming. We mustn't . . ."

Mustn't what? And wasn't anything ever untidy at his place? All his books, boxes, tubes and phials on his desk. Did HE tidy up?

He arrived.

"Well, Emile?"

That's why I went on going to him. I always thought he must have messed about with my sister a bit when she was young. That allows me to ask for reductions. When he sends me a bill I go to see him.

"Sir, you know my family responsibilities."

I hang my head.

"Since poor Justine died . . ."

He looks awkward. Sometimes when I've nothing to do I say to myself I'll go and see Cassagne. He sounds me. He looks disgusted. I can see clearly. He draws back a little as his ear comes closer. (And him? with his bald head that smells of babies' nappies and that smell of old curtains which comes up from his collar.) Or he tells me to keep my shirt on. I pretend I don't understand.

"Certainly, sir."

And I take it off all the same. He is upset. It's true that I'm usually damp. What do other people do? SOME others. I stand on one side. They don't smell. They have no smell. I always smell a bit. And I say:

"Still, I've just the same skin as poor Justine, don't you think so, sir? You can see that we belong to the same family. The same blood, I would say."

He stands up and looks at me through his glasses. He never thinks of getting rid of his worried look.

"And the same face," I say. "Don't you think that I'm like Justine?"

One day he blew up.

"Don't talk to me about Justine all the time."

Then, with a knowing air, I said:

"I understand."

He was in a mess, the sawbones.

"Poor little thing," he blurted out. "I looked after her right until the end."

It was true that for three days he hardly left her bedside. And he cried. He could cry all right. Just think that at one time he made her come to see him as often as three times a week. For injections, he said. In her behind. One day one side, one day the other side. And she was chubby, my sister, she had to be seen. And I saw her. So you can see. Although . . . Careful. CAREFUL. Don't fall into the system. Into this system . . . I say, Justine, the doctor, three times a week . . . Good! but did I see them? No. Am I sure? No. However . . . but there is no however. One of the things I've discovered is this, that every conclusion, every deduction, calculation or supposition is dangerous. Sometimes true, yes, but sometimes false, too, never inevitable. Never. Facts, situations and characteristics are not figures which can be added up to give a certain result. NO. You say: a man, a nice little girl of about sixteen, a chubby one, her behind, no witnesses. Sum total: you wink. IN-EV-IT-ABLE. Well, not at all. It's a mistake! System! Nothing is inevitable. Another total is always possible. But what about probability? Probability is the name that men have given to a certain system of which I, now, I KNOW IT IS WRONG. Or, at least, I know it is wrong as a system. I know it gives no guarantee. No real one. A man, a woman, a behind, no witnesses, well, it's not obligatory that it makes this or that total. It permits fifteen, twenty or a hundred different totals.

Example:

(No, no, I don't forget that I was talking about 'fit as a fiddle'. I haven't finished. I have not lost sight of it.



But this is a parenthesis.) I come back to my example: One evening, in the rue du Bouloi, I followed a couple. I like following couples. It sometimes gives you a chance to . . . In short I followed them. It was interesting. The street was deserted. The couple were quarrelling. Especially the man.

"But Edouard," said the woman.

"Oh, you make me sick," he said. "You're not a woman, you're a dose of salts."

Then all at once:

"I've had enough!"

"Edouard!"

"Go and f . . . yourself."

And he left with big strides, his shoulders forward, like a bear. The woman walked more quickly. But he began to run.

"Edouard!" she shouted again.

And she stopped. I went up to her.

"Well, he's a brute all right . . ."

"That's my business," she threw back at me.

With a 'my business' that nearly tore her tongue out of her mouth. As though she was spitting her words out.

"I didn't want to offend you."

She emitted another spiteful grumbling sound towards the end of the street.

"But frankly," I went on, "at two o'clock in the morning you shouldn't do things like that."

"Especially as I haven't got a bean," she said to me then. "And I live in Bezons. I wonder where I'm going to sleep."

In the end, step by step, I took her back with me. I was still a bachelor at that time. I had a room in the rue Montorgueil. The woman got into my bed. So did I. At that point, everyone says, the rest . . . Because of the system, as a matter of course. Because of probability.

But not at all. Next? There was no next. I tried, of course. (I, too, because of the system: A woman in my bed, I have to.) But she didn't want to hear anything about it.

"Leave me alone," she said. "I'm unhappy. It doesn't mean anything to me."

It didn't mean anything to her, there it was. It didn't mean anything to her and all the system broke down. A man, a woman, a bed. Situation obvious. Evidence. But: nothing. A conclusion which imposed itself. Only it didn't impose itself. What was wrong? What? I was young. The woman was young, too, no worse than any other. The bed wasn't bad. No, there was nothing wrong. But nothing happened. She was unhappy? But the call of one body to another, doesn't that exist? The laws of the species? The dominion of the flesh? And all those things that according to the system just LAUGH at obstacles? Well, this time, the dominion of the flesh must have had the laugh all to itself. The woman didn't want to, that's all. It meant nothing to her. Couldn't I have raped her? You're joking, she was stronger than me. And I tell you that rape isn't my line. I felt sorry for her, too. This woman moaning. At one point she was thirsty. I got up to get her a glass of water. This doesn't mean that I didn't feel her a bit all the same. Naturally. She didn't mind me feeling her. But nothing else. And all the time she didn't stop sniffing and swallowing her sobs. In the morning she said to me:

"I'm deadly, aren't I?"

When daylight came, the system got hold of her again. The system whereby a man, a woman, and a bed added up to a total known in advance. A total from which it is indecent and impossible to escape. And from which we did escape. During the night she didn't want to. Because during the night everything is possible. Because night is

liberty. Because during the night, naturally, our dark energies control us. Our real energies. Our true desires. When daylight is back, our dark desires are dissipated. Probability came back. Logic. Principles. All those things which hold us prisoner. The system in fact. And she apologised for it. "I'm deadly, aren't I?" As though she was guilty. Guilty of not having done something which she didn't want to do. Guilty of not having done something which, this time, would only have found its justification in the system and not in ourselves. Isn't that so? And I myself, that morning when I arrived at the office, I said to my colleagues:

"Well, chaps, you mustn't count too much on Magis, Emile, today. I'm dead beat. What a wonderful night I've had!"

And I came out with my story. Changing the end, naturally. Not through vanity. I'm not one bit vain. But because of the system. Because I was afraid of showing the others that I wasn't like them. Because for the others, a man, a woman and a bed make up the total: one night of love. In my case, the total had been different. So I lied. I said to myself, it's not possible, there must be a gap somewhere. And I filled the gap. My colleagues congratulated me.

"Blasted Magis!"

With a dash of envy. Because they were married. So they envied me. They envied me for having had a woman for one night, because they had a woman every night. That's the world. That's its logic. And they asked me for details. And old Barbedart told a story of the same kind. Neighbour on the same landing, one night, when he was young. But suddenly the idea came to me, if my story was a lie, why should Barbedart's be true? Isn't that so? I'd told a lie. He could have lied too. And others before him. Perhaps the same thing had happened to other people

that happened to me. Having a woman in their bed and not having her. And like me perhaps it had scared them. And instead of doubting the system they had preferred to doubt themselves and instead of telling the story they had kept quiet. Or they tried to forget it. Or they told it like me, changing the ending. And everything was falsified. Everything. For thousands of years. Lies follow on lies. Including mine. My lie which I told because of the system but which, at the same time, strengthened the system. My lie coming to join the possible lie of Barbedart. The system exists. The system according to which a man and a woman in the same bed INEVITABLY adds up to the total: one night of love. Fine, it exists. But is it true? That's the question I suddenly asked myself. Is it inevitable? Or on the contrary is it only a probability? True once, not true the next day. Because, I said to myself, if the system is true, then I am abnormal and exceptional, a monster, someone to whom things happen which only happen to him. But DID THEY ONLY HAPPEN TO ME? In the end I was revolted. Through always coming back to the system. Through always finding myself outside it. These things only happened to me? But why then to me? It was always this business of being fit as a fiddle. (You see, it looked as though I was a long way away from it but I'm coming back.) Always the same problem. With other people, a man, a woman, and a bed: they make love. Always. It never fails. For me, this time, it had failed. Other people woke up fit as a fiddle. I, NEVER. So was I a monster? Or an invalid? But Cassagne pretended I wasn't. And another doctor after him, a specialist.

"You're not strong, but you've an iron constitution. You could live till you're a hundred."

Now science exists. Doctors are something. They have instruments. They know what it is all about. Health can be measured. Diagnosis is precise. Then, if doctors

told me that there was nothing particular the matter with me, it was because in that domain at least I was normal. Like other people. No different. But other people woke up as fit as a fiddle.

"Listen, sir, I'll explain it to you."

He listened to me.

"Oh," he said, "I too, I wake up with these symptoms. They don't mean a thing."

He too? So there were at least two of us. Two who didn't wake up fit as a fiddle. And yet he wasn't abnormal. He was even a very well known doctor. He had the Legion of Honour.

It was then that I began to wonder if this story about being as fit as a fiddle wasn't a lot of lies. Or a phrase that people just said like that, without checking up or making sure, just for the sake of talking like the rest of the world. Or whether it was not something that had been true in the past, when life was more healthy, when we didn't have all these worries and when we didn't eat all these dreadful things. Something that people went on saying through habit. I carried out a little enquiry.

"Barbedart, do you get up easily in the morning?"

"Tantararara!"

Imitating a bugle. Because he had been in the war this lunatic imitated a bugle every other moment.

"At seven o'clock, Magis. Seven o'clock, the zero's hour."

"But easily?"

"At one leap, Magis!"

The big lout. At one leap. What about your ceiling?

"But if you wake up easily," I went on, "it isn't complicated, you don't deserve any credit."

Barbedart was stung.

"Easily? Oh no, not easily. It's a question of

discipline. I've decided that. But easily, no. My leg hurts me in the morning. Souvenir of the Argonne!"

The Argonne, there's another example. Barbedart was in the Argonne. I don't say it but he has also been in the flood of Paris. For several days. So his rheumatism could come from there. But all the same he says the Argonne. And there are the people who are witnesses in lawsuits.

"Fancy," said Tanson. "Your legs? With me it's my throat. Every morning my throat hurts me. It goes off, mind you. I drink coffee and hey presto, it's gone. It must be nerves from what I can see."

There you are! Where were those fit people? The doctor, Barbedart, Tanson, the first three that I questioned, they didn't wake up fit as a fiddle.

"And what about your wife, Barbedart?"

"Oh, I've trained her. But it was hard going."

So there were lots of people who didn't wake up fit as a fiddle. Lots. Because you can't tell me that I'd come across just the only three men in the world who woke up differently from the others. That I'd come across three other abnormal people. There were others. This didn't prevent the system from surviving. The phrase survives. 'The next day, he woke up fit as a fiddle.' As though everyone woke up fit as a fiddle. While for the moment I've never found one. I thought I was abnormal. Unique. Exceptional. And then I noticed that heaps of others were like me. I thought I was outside the system. And now I found that the system didn't exist. That it was false. But what about the rest? Because being as fit as a fiddle, it's a simple thing, which is easily understood. Easy to check. Physical in a way. But what about the rest? Feelings, desire, father-love? Everything that doctors cannot check. Here again, was it I who was different or the system that was wrong? The system according to which a man, a

woman and a bed . . . But if the system was wrong? The others—whom I saw there, before me, like a heap, like an egg—an egg, and on the opposite side, me all alone—then I began to wonder whether the others were not different too, different from the system, different between themselves. And therefore as alone as I was. I had to check all that. CHECK IT.

## CHAPTER 2

IT'S LIKE THIS AFFAIR. THE MAGIS AFFAIR. Which bears my name—as though I had married it—as though I had to spend the rest of my life with it. Well, there's a misunderstanding there too. Something that's wrong. And it doesn't help for me to know there's a misunderstanding, which I can't quite escape from. Because for other people this affair has become me, and I have become this affair. Identified in some way.

“Magis? Isn't that the bloke who . . .”

“Exactly.”

Whereas I personally feel sure that this business doesn't count. Or rather, it wouldn't count if other people weren't so obstinate about it. Other people's obstinacy which is continually taking me back to it. This morning I've had yet another conversation with the magistrate. Of course, I had to warn Monsieur Raffard. To justify my absence. Well, this afternoon already Raffard rushed towards me.

“Well, Magis?”

And my colleagues asked me:

“How does it stand?”

It interests them! Now for my part it doesn't interest me. I don't even want to talk about this conversation. Or if I did, it would be like one detail out of a thousand. Not particularly important. While for them the Magis affair is a whole story. For ten years they'll never mention me without adding ‘you know, the bloke who.’ As though there was nothing else in my life. Magis, the bloke who. Like a tin in which there were biscuits, cake, collar studs, electric light bulbs, beans and one gherkin, and on which



someone writes 'tin of gherkins'. Let alone that in the circumstances the gherkin isn't even a gherkin. Because I lied to the magistrate. And to save myself I made what I did become part of the system of logic and likelihood. And I told a lie. I told a lie exactly as all men go on lying, exactly as they have done for centuries, with their fit as a fiddle, with their man, woman and bed. As they lie with their deductions, their conclusions and their logic.

Take note that I don't say that everything is false. No, it isn't all false. That would be too simple. It isn't all false. If men, in general have been sleeping with women for a goodish length of time, if, in general they run on all fours after a thousand franc note, and if in general they don't like beating their father there must be reasons for it, there must be something. Certainly, a tendency, a taste for something, a need. Good. But how far, since all time, has it been exaggerated? Stiffened up? Made rigid? How far has all that not been the result of the system? And how far especially are we not wrong about the importance of these things? About their respective importance? It's that most of all which worries me—the RESPECTIVE IMPORTANCE. They say: love. And they say: to play cards. But why, in virtue of what, is one more important than the other? The little girl has left her beads on the table. One of them is in a ray of sunshine. It is blue. It makes a round shadow and in the middle a little liquid mark of blue light. Good. Who will tell me now why the moment I've just passed looking at this liquid spot is less important than that for example, when I saw through the keyhole that my wife was deceiving me? Yes, why? Why does the second of these events deserve more commentary than the first? Putting my hand in my pocket I scratch my thigh. Isn't this gesture, which nobody thinks of mentioning, just as important as for example the act of sleeping with a woman? Well? And why don't people

tell that they have scratched their thigh, their own thigh, when they tell so gladly that they have touched the thigh of a woman? A woman who's nothing to them. Why? The system. Always the system. Everywhere.

I wanted to start by recounting my childhood. In detail. From the beginning. Because I wanted to be complete. Because I thought it was interesting. People have these ideas sometimes, these manias, these obsessions which date from a long way back, which go back to something seen or experienced at the age of four. Isn't it so? Well, I gave it up because I understood immediately that as far as my childhood was concerned, I should be a prisoner of the system. Because memory itself is poisoned by the system. I'd said to myself: my childhood, fine. And I was already going to describe an outing that we had made to Nogent. That I had been in a swing with Justine. That father had a scrap with a drunk. It is one of my memories. It is even the first which came into my mind. Now, in all my childhood, how many times did I go to Nogent? Once. Once only. One single day. And so what importance does this outing present, compared for example, to the nail that I had in my bench at school for a whole year, when I was in the third form? The nail that pestered me, and scratched me, which tore my trousers and made me get slapped, and which finished by giving me a carbuncle. The nail in fact which, FOR A YEAR, occupied me, inhabited me, which was INSIDE my life. The outing to Nogent took up one Sunday. One only. With some events, yes. The swing, the drunk, Justine crying because she fell down, the woman who sang *Carmen* in the tram. But *one* Sunday. Twelve hours. While the nail occupied me for a whole year. Subtract the Thursdays, the Sundays and the holidays, there are still forty weeks left, each consisting of twenty-six hours. Total (because those hours add up), total: 1,040 hours. One thousand and forty compared with twelve. Which means

that in order to have the right to consecrate ten lines to Nogent, I had first of all to consecrate to the nail more than EIGHT HUNDRED AND SIXTY. In order to be fair. In order to give a fair idea. In order to keep the perspective. Now is it possible? Can you see me talking about this nail for eight hundred and sixty lines? Nearly twenty-five pages? And what was I to say about it? There's the problem. One wants to tell the story. One wants to give an idea. But what one tells—what one remembers—is what emerges from it. That is, what is exceptional. The trip to Nogent. But my childhood was not passed at Nogent. My childhood was grey. Grey, with a lighter streak from time to time—as in the shadow of the bead: Nogent. But have I the right to speak of this light patch when the ensemble, the truth, the reality, is the grey? And why was I going to speak of Nogent? Because of the system. Always. Because, without realising it, I tended to rejoin all the other childhood memories, where there is always a swing, to Nogent or the equivalent. A swing which existed moreover. Like mine. I would have spoken to you about it, I couldn't have lied. In one way. Because, in another way, I would have lied all the same, in falsifying the perspective, and not giving the real importance of things. The respective importance. The importance of the swing in relation to the nail. And everything would have been falsified. Deformed. NO?

Example (and a LITERARY example): the book of Edgar Champion. A MAN NOTHING BUT A MAN. You've read it, I suppose. There was enough talk about it. It's his souvenirs, his confessions. A man looks back over his past, as he writes it himself. I'll say everything, he explains in his preface, to hell with modesty, I don't want to hide anything, I'll tear the veil aside, this book is a document. And in fact he tells things which one doesn't usually tell: that he was underhand, and a liar; that from the age of

twelve he couldn't be held back; that he masturbated; that he stole his aunt's underwear and used it to excite himself. Fine, all that's very nice. The trouble is that I knew him, Edgar Champion. And just when he was twelve. His parents lived in the rue du Borrégo, a little further up than us, above the haberdasher's. We went to the same school in the rue Pilleport. We left together. We came back together. His mother often talked to mine. Once even when the family had to go to a funeral in the North, Edgar was left with us for two days. Alone together at last. As friendly as you can imagine. The first time he saw how girls were made he told me immediately. That proves something. Well, I never heard a mention of his aunt's knickers. Never. For Champion, at that age, his speciality was petrol. It was this boy's vice, his mania, his pleasure. He was always stuck away in garages, sniffing petrol cans. He got into a corner with his nose in a can and he didn't move, in ecstasy, quite pale, with his nostrils contracted. He even drank the petrol. He took the corks to lick them. I'm not inventing anything. He didn't hide things either. He often spoke to me about it.

"There's nothing better," he used to say.

It was known in the district. The garage-hands joked about it. In one way it flattered them. They would call him.

"Edgar, come here!"

He could smell petrol twenty yards away. He covered himself with dirty grease up to the eyes. His mother complained about it.

"Edgar and his petrol. What a pity it is. You can't imagine the filth of it, Madame Magis. His suits are really foul. It's no use scrubbing them. And it's bad for him. Just think, petrol's poison. The doctor said so!"

And even to me, it was

"You ought to stop him, Emile."

Well, you can't tell me that this didn't have a different type of importance for him than his aunt's knickers. Only for the good of his health so far. I met him the other day in the avenue de Villiers. He has hollow cheeks and a bad skin. This craze must have left traces within his organism. Or perhaps he even went on with it. Now that he has a car himself, and a garage of his own. I know that he didn't stop all at once, anyway. Towards seventeen or eighteen we had lost sight of each other a bit, but I met him sometimes with a literary paper under his arm. He still smelt of petrol. In fact it was something important. And which lasted. But you can go on looking in his confessions. Not a word about petrol. When I was seventeen, he writes, I used to mix with pimps and anarchists. Of course, he might have known a pimp or an anarchist from time to time although there weren't any in our district. But I can say that he still smelt of petrol. Then why doesn't he talk about it? I left my parents, he writes, I was in their way. It's true he was in their way. Always because of the petrol. Father, when he met him, said:

"The smell of that boy."

But why didn't he mention it? "I say everything!" I'm sorry! What about the petrol? Note that his aunt's knickers are perhaps a true story. He had an aunt, in fact, who lived with them, an old maid, but she had breasts and worked in the store in the avenue Gambetta. So I won't say that he's lying. (What's more, I warn you once and for all that I'm not looking for truth here, but for REALITY.) The aunt's knickers probably did exist. It was perhaps true that Champion stole them. But he does lie all the same in giving them an importance which in relationship to the petrol they never possessed. Because after all, if the knickers had taken on such proportions I'd have known about it. He would have told me. Or his mother would have mentioned it to mine. Or his brother would have

talked about it. Just to give him hell. In fact, I'd have known. But nothing at all. Then, if he did it, it was once or twice. Just in passing. An experience. Child's play. Child's play whose importance had no connection with that of the petrol. And then he tells lies. Like the tin of gherkins. Because when a tin has in it eighteen biscuits and two gherkins it's a lie to write on it 'tin of gherkins'. And it's even a lie to write on it 'tin of biscuits and gherkins'. Because of the relative importance. Because of the perspective. Because there are more biscuits than gherkins. In Champion's tin there are twenty petrol cans and only one little pair of knickers and only one little anarchist. So, by mentioning only the knickers and the anarchist—even if they have existed—he's lying. Or at least he's deforming things. He falsifies. He mutilates. He deepens the misunderstanding.

Because after all, suppose now that a professor or a critic wanted to use these confessions to analyse the other work of Champion. Fine, he'll say, the aunt's knickers, that's excellent! I've got there some really serious material, just at twelve years old, the deep instincts of a human being; perfect, let us see what traces these knickers have left in Champion's novels. And he goes to look. And what will he find? I wonder. Less in any case than, if like me, he knew about the petrol story. Obviously. The petrol story which really dominated all Champion's childhood.

Besides it's very simple. I've read all Champion's novels. There they are. In a row. Each one with its dedication. It isn't that he thinks of sending them to me, but whenever one comes out I buy it, I cut the pages (tact!), I leave it at his concierge's, with a little note—and I come back to take it a few days later. With the dedication. A dedication which could be, I find, more friendly, but which in any case does prove that we used to know each other. 'To my dear Magis, witness of my childhood.' Or: 'To

dear old Magis, comrade of the years of misery.' (Misery! Neither his parents nor mine ever lived in misery. But one must accept the fact that misery is part of the system, and not poverty.)

So I've read them. Now, in each of Champion's books, there's at least one bedroom scene. It must be said that he is known for his slightly daring descriptions. In the six novels that he has published I've counted ten (not counting oddments). Now let someone tell me: in real life, where do love scenes take place? You'll tell me that they can happen anywhere and that you've seen every possible sort. Agreed. But as a general rule. Grosso modo? Collect your memories together. I think that I'm not going too far in saying that GENERALLY they take place in a bedroom. People say, bed-room. That's got a meaning hasn't it? Let us say, eight times out of ten. That seems to me a reasonable average. Well, in Champion's novels, it isn't at all. I've checked up.

#### STATISTICS OF THE EROTIC SCENES IN EDGAR CHAMPION'S

##### WORK

In a bedroom (private or in a hotel) .....	3
In a wardrobe .....	1
By the side of a road .....	1
In a car .....	4
In an office .....	1

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10

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Well, I think that my statistics probe deeply. That they're revealing. Where are the little knickers that belonged to the aunt and the professor? In the wardrobe? In that wardrobe which is there, all alone, as against four motor-cars? I know that you can make love anywhere, in a taxi just as in a bedroom. One hasn't always got any choice. Fine. If there had been one or two taxis I

wouldn't have said anything. But FOUR (twice in a taxi, once in a private car, once in a trailer). Four times out of ten! And even five because in my opinion, one should add the scene in the office since this office in question is located just over a garage. Five times out of six. Once out of two occasions. You can't tell me that it's pure coincidence. A novelist however has only too much choice. He can have convenient rooms or barns where the straw doesn't prickle. It doesn't cost him anything. But here is one who, on one occasion out of two, finds it necessary, to excite himself or to create atmosphere, to evoke a background that smells of petrol. Which suggests petrol. One OCCASION OUT OF TWO. While there are so many places, so many smells, so many perfumes. And on one occasion out of two, petrol. Is it natural? How will the professor explain that, with his knickers?

Without counting the fact that there are other things to comment on in these statistics. We must look at it a little more closely. The scene by the side of the road, for example. In THE 31ST OF AUGUST. There are trees, birds, a kite being flown by a father and his brat. But here also are the road, the lorries that go by, the smell of the tarmac, the exhaust fumes, in fact the whole world of petrol. And one of the scenes in a hotel bedroom, in SOUTHERN SUBURB. It's a hotel bedroom, fine, with a bed. Nothing more natural. But the hero of the scene, the man who makes love, what does he do in life? Apart from making love? He's a mechanic. In overalls. And he smells of petrol, of course. I don't even want to speak of the respective importance of all these scenes. Because there too, there's room for comment. There are three scenes which take place in a bedroom, agreed, but the three of them put together only make twenty-six pages whereas the one rape scene in the trailer takes eighteen. Ah! you're not going to tell me that it's just accident. No,



there's something there. Something unconscious; of course, but which has all the more weight. More meaning. And something which, without me, I wonder how people would explain. The knickers? The anarchist? What is the connection? Where is their influence? There's petrol, that's all. The taste of petrol. The vice of petrol. Of which Champion does not speak. About which he's careful to keep quiet.

Now why didn't he mention it? 'I am telling everything.' But not about the petrol. Why? Was he ashamed? Was he timid? A man who can tell the story of the knickers can't be timid about everything. So why the knickers and not the petrol? Well, it's the system. Always the system. Fear about the system. Because the knickers are part of the system. They already belong to a whole tradition: the shoes of Restif de la Bretonne, the spanking of Rousseau's, the handkerchief stolen from the cousin. While petrol cans . . . Perhaps petrol hasn't existed long enough. So Champion must have felt himself a bit lonely. All alone with his petrol before a world which had never spoken of it. All alone before a world where PERHAPS nobody had found his private pleasure in smelling petrol. He was frightened.

And there was something to be afraid of. Just think! To have to say to yourself that you're perhaps alone with your vice. To have to say to yourself that you're perhaps a monster. Oh, it's horrible. I really think so. And I know it. Because I too, for a long time, I thought I was alone, I believed myself to be abnormal. Because of the fit-as-a-fiddle business. Because of a man, a woman and a bed. Because of a host of other things. And it's horrible. It makes you feel afraid. Champion must have been afraid. So in his misery he hung up his aunt's knickers in front of him. To try to join the others. As though to say to them: you see, I'm just like you, my aunt's knickers, nothing

more. Not a word about the petrol. Because there was a gesture which forced him to admit it and at the same time he didn't dare tell the truth. Does that surprise you? Haven't you ever known those husbands who, having been to bed with a woman, find it necessary to say to their wife, when they come home:

"By the way, I met Julie. I took her for a drink."

Without saying that they went to bed, of course, but without hiding the fact that they saw each other. It was the same thing with Champion, I feel it. He wanted to explain himself. He wanted to confess. Because it's horrible when you can't confess. But he didn't dare mention the petrol. Because it was new. Because of the risk of finding himself alone, with his petrol. So he replaced it with something that he thought was the equivalent: the knickers. He wanted to give an idea of it, that's what it was. To give an idea of his tragedy. Then at the moment when he was about to define things he drew back. He transposed. That's the lie in it. The system. Because the shoes of Restif de la Bretonne were perhaps something else too. Whom can you trust in that case? Where can you look for a serious report? And that's been going on for centuries. That's where the tragedy is. The tragedy, I'm not exaggerating. Because Champion tried to become one of them, with his knickers. But in the depths of his conscience he must know that he has not become one of them. And that he has even lost his only chance of becoming so. His only chance which was that among his readers there would be one who would write to him: me too, it's petrol. And this other man in his turn . . . Isn't it so? Because there are certainly others too who like the taste of petrol—and who believe themselves alone in this mania, who feel themselves abnormal, monsters, and who are afraid. And who, because of Champion, because of his silence, continue to believe themselves alone.

Now, in my case, when I was a kid, I got pleasure out of taking a crust of bread and eating it in bed, in the evening, before going to sleep. That had an effect upon me. That made my saliva run in the special way that happens now when I think of certain women and certain positions. Well, you can't imagine how far this crust business contributed to my solitude. Contributed to shutting me up in that sort of prison which has surrounded me for so long. But all the same it was nothing at all as a mania. Innocent. One day when I was talking to a doctor about my insomnia, he said to me:

"Have you tried the trick of eating a little something before going to bed, a bit of bread or a rusk?"

So it was a completely natural mania. Almost hygienic. Only, when I was a kid, I didn't know. Nobody had ever told me that at night when he went to bed he liked eating a crust of bread. So I felt I was alone. I felt I was different. Excluded. Leprous. Accursed. And it was horrible. I wanted to get hold of the others at school and ask them:

"Tell me, in the evening . . . a crust of bread? Never? Really never?"

And I didn't dare. And there were certainly dozens of us, hundreds of us. Not daring. Each one alone with his shame. Each one a prisoner. Suffering, I with my crust of bread, Champion with his petrol. Poor Champion! Perhaps he believed that it would close the doors of the Académie Française to him. So he spoke of the knickers instead. He admitted that he masturbated. Because there he had references. Because the knickers and the masturbation already belonged to the same system. The tradition. It's known. Filed. But why? And why that and not petrol? Ah, writers could perform such services in this field. Instead of saying nothing. Instead of reinforcing the system, like Champion, deforming things, transposing

them, adding their lie to all the others. It's true, that. There would be the Permanent Secretary of the Académie Française who would write I can't think what, for example that he had a habit of putting his finger in his nose and then licking it (instead of saying stupidly that he masturbated), well, that would be useful. All the people who have the same trick (my colleague Vignolle among others), would feel reassured. They would say to each other: well, I thought I was alone, but I'm not; I took myself for someone peculiar, but not a bit of it, it won't stop me from becoming Permanent Secretary of the Académie Française. They would feel less alone. The world would be less sad. We wouldn't be like we are now, each one suffering, each one shut up.

## CHAPTER 3

So it was a pestering childhood. Pestered rather. Nothing more. Just grey. A desert. Nothingness. Or almost. I take the word childhood. I look at it, I turn it over, I sniff at it, I chew it over: not much. Except the taste of a cold, the smell of a cold. Every winter I got a cold. Starting with the first days at school. Regular. The first cold days and I came home sniffing.

“That’s it. Now Emile’s got his cold.”

Because it was my cold. My own cold. Always the same. It came back. Faithfully. It arrived towards September-October. One year I was able to go as far as All-Saints’ Day. My mother was getting worried.

“Well, what about your cold?”

It left me towards the end of March. Regularly. And from October to March I lived shut up in my cold. Because it’s a prison too, a cold. You’re shut up in it. Your nose stuffed up, your ears swollen, your throat thick, all the ways out sealed up, things only reaching you as if through cotton wool, your head that you carry around as though you had something on your shoulders that shouldn’t be there: a balloon, a ball, a terrestrial globe. Note that someone should have been able to look after me. A cold can be treated. And my mother did something about it, too. She drew landscapes on my chest with tincture of iodine (a striped pattern, like bars—in order to complete the prison). But nothing more. Nothing serious. Because of the system. Already the system. ‘A cold’s nothing. You don’t stay in bed for a cold.’

“You could take him to the doctor,” said my father.

"You can't bother the doctor over a cold. Whatever would he say?"

"Well, we pay him," said my sister.

A hussy, my sister. She wasn't afraid of words. I think my mother WAS afraid of words.

"Don't we pay him?"

My mother would get angry.

"Have you finished?"

There are countries, I've read somewhere, where they pay a tax on religion. I don't know exactly how it works, but I suppose that when people pay their taxes they don't have the idea for one minute that they're paying God himself. Or it's like us with the ministers. Or the dancers at the Opera. It is us who pay them in fact. Everything considered. But we lose sight of the fact. Because I pay a minister it wouldn't occur to me to call him in to come and mend the pipes. And if I met one I would still be the first to greet him. I who pay him all the same. It's perhaps silly, but it's like that. (There must be something of the system in that, but I don't quite see how.) Well, my mother understood this feeling in many people. The doctor, the landlord, the butcher. As though this payment was a sort of tribute, a tax paid to a superior divinity who, in exchange, in order to recompense her for her homage, sent her delegates charged with examining, with more or less goodwill, her humble pleas concerning her health, her scallops or her living quarters. I wonder what was the cause of it all. Because she didn't have the same feeling about everybody. About the butcher, yes, but not about the grocer. Nor about Madame Pigeon, later, when she had her for two hours a day to do the heavy work, because of her legs which had got swollen and gave her pains. You should have heard her.

"Do I pay her or not? I pay her for her work. And I still have to be nice to her!"

Perhaps it was because she paid Madame Pigeon directly every day, like the grocer. While with the butcher it was once a week, the landlord once a month and the doctor when he sent the bill. I suppose it was that. But it's an explanation like all explanations: it isn't worth much and immediately something crops up to contradict it. Waiters for example. Sometimes we did our shopping further away, some distance off. My mother was born in the Denfert-Rochereau district. So, for certain things (night-dresses, socks), she went as far back as that. Before starting back we sat down in a café and drank something. My mother paid the waiter and gave him a tip. But it was direct payment all the same. Well, for her, I could see it easily from her face, it wasn't payment. It was the tax, the tribute, the homage. The same for the doctor. She held out her twenty centimes with an anxious expression and a sort of respect. The shade of meaning: kindly accept. Which shows that men are not simple, as I always say.

So, for my cold, they didn't disturb the doctor. And all winter I dragged my cold, on me, round me, well installed, lying there comfortably, while I blew my nose. It was by chance that the doctor took any notice of it. He had come to see Justine. I blew my nose.

"Goodness," he said, "have you got a cold?"

Clever man!

Then, when he next came, as usual to see Justine:

"What, you've still got that cold?"

He asked for details.

"Colds that last six months, that's silly, Madame Magis. And you didn't mention it to me. You treat me like a . . . You must take care of him once and for all, this boy. Put him to bed for three days, with hot drinks, so that he'll sweat."

I stayed in my bed for three days, sweating deliciously. (I must speak about sweating again. There are things to

say about it. I LIKE SWEATING.) And my cold went. I never had anything else for the whole winter. Next year, in October, bang, there's my cold back again. Do you think my mother let me go back to bed, with hot drinks? Not a bit of it.

"You don't go to bed for a cold."

"But the doctor . . ."

"We're not going to bother the doctor for that."

Such is the strength of the system. First definition of the system: other people's experiences—but not verified, not controlled, reduced to they-say's—substituted for your own experience. Rumour taking the place of reality. Dictums, recipes, principles—and chosen for preference from among the most vague—coming to interpose themselves between oneself and what one sees, experiences and feels. I know that . . . I've found that . . . But the others say that . . . (And others, who know nothing about it, the haberdasher rather than the doctor, the concierge rather than the lawyer.) So I'm wrong. So, I OUGHT to be wrong. It's impossible for me to be right because all the others say that . . . The system, AMONG OTHER THINGS, is the modesty of man before other men. It is the effacement before other people—or rather before what one can glimpse of others—before what one believes of others, before what other people admit—and as other people never cease to tell lies and as we ourselves are other people for other people, you go on for ever.

Modesty, yes. I insist on the word. I will say even more: modesty taken as far as a general feeling of guilt. The story of the woman in my bed, for example. You remember that, in order to tell it to my colleagues, I had changed the ending. Not for vanity, I said. Exactly. It was even for modesty. Because I looked at the sum total of a man, a woman and a bed. With my total which was not announced to the exterior. With my total which was



not one night of love. But, supposing even that this total was inevitable, it was still not a reason for thinking that the gap came from me. Isn't it so? There was not only just me in the addition. There was also the woman and the bed. The gap could be there. That's what a really vain man would have thought. 'What a half-wit, this woman. If only she knew what she'd missed!' While as for me, I'd begun by saying that the gap ought to be in me. And I filled it. And I told a lie. Like a guilty man. Through humility, in fact. Through modesty. No? Everything taken into consideration. Because I felt guilty. Guilty of I don't know what deficiency. Just guilty. The system.

## CHAPTER 4

Perhaps I've talked rather a long time about that cold. I don't excuse myself. It isn't very entertaining, I suspect, but it isn't my aim to entertain. My aim is to know, to UNDERSTAND, to EXPLAIN. My aim is to give to each of my events and to each of my habits its real importance and that attributed to it by the system. Would you prefer that I invented, that I deformed, that I do like Champion and that instead of the cold I tell stories about lifting up girls' skirts? Or stories about looking through the bathroom keyhole when we have never ever had a bathroom? Or through the lavatory keyhole when in our flats they only had latches? I know it would be more fun. But fun is one thing. And reality is another. Of course, I lifted up little girls' skirts (or rather I've watched my friends do it—or else I've done it with my sister). But rarely. And in any case, it didn't have a quarter as much importance in my childhood as the cold had. That cold, which, for four months of the year, ONE DAY OUT OF THREE, weighed down on all my actions, on all my thoughts, which transformed me into a sort of sandwich-man shut in between his two boards, stiff, clumsy, swollen, unable to run, somnolent, prevented from sleeping by coughing and speaking as though from the depths of a cavern of cotton wool.

“Say good morning to Madame Champion.”

“Borning, Badabe Bampion.”

I was taken for a fool. And I FELT a fool. I feel guilty. Guilty of this cold different from other people's colds. Shut off in it. SHUT OFF. Yes, if there exists an explanation for things or the start of an explanation which goes back to childhood, can't I see in this cold the reason—

one of the reasons, one in a thousand—for which, throughout so many years, I had my body and my soul and my desires around me like a prison? (With the bars of the tincture of iodine on my chest. Everyone has his own prison bars, always on himself, you could say they were a model prison.)

Besides, there is still this: apart from the cold I don't remember so many things. I must have a short memory. Careful. CHECK IT. Never say a word in future without looking underneath it. It's true that I'd be killed for telling something about my grandfather's funeral. Exactly. But, besides that there are also trifles, voices, smells, which I remember as though it were yesterday. So what? Perhaps in fact they are not trifles. Perhaps in the end the trifle is my grandfather's funeral, and what is important is the smell of the sweet shop where I sometimes used to go with Champion in the rue Haxo. In fact, I don't often think about the past. Nor about the future either. The past for me is grey. The future black. For my childhood I can see the cold, the trip to Nogent, the nail. I can see Champion—but would I remember him if he had not become famous?—I see again the school, Monsieur Petitjean who had always beautiful shoes that squeaked and Monsieur Misson whose wife, from what they said, came and waited for him at the door to have a row with him—what a nerve. I see again the street, my father, my sister, the concierge who complained all the time because we played in the courtyard.

“I say, Madame Magis, you must remember to give your Emile a slap for me. He's been plaguing my cat again.”

She had a long horsey face, with her hands always under her armpits, tucked against herself.

“Your cat, Madame Pontus? Your beautiful cat. I'm

very sorry, Madame Pontus. I'll punish him, you can be sure."

Because she always agreed with other people, my mother. Always. Without checking up.

"My cat, Madame Magis."

"Very well, Madame Pontus. Oh, I'll punish him. He won't do it again."

And she was deferent with everybody. Mr. doctor, Mr. butcher.

"You see, Emile, politeness is the wealth of the poor man."

And, in view of her good manners, it was for her that Mr. butcher kept his second rate cuts rather than for that viper Madame Pontus. My sister pointed it out. My mother did not change.

"With politeness you can get everything."

The system. With her politeness she got mainly kicks in the pants. She didn't even notice it. Because she was like the others, looking at the system rather than at reality, the principle rather than the experience. Or perhaps she didn't DARE notice it. Perhaps that she too, like me, was afraid of being alone. Of being the only woman in the world for whom politeness didn't succeed. So she still preferred to deny the evidence. Like a guilty person. Through modesty, yet again. Always the total. The false total. Politeness + other people + poor woman = general goodwill. There's the principle. The model type of sum. But my mother did not obtain general goodwill. So perhaps she accused herself of it. Perhaps she accused the one element of it—poor woman. Instead of accusing the element—other people. Instead, more simply, of doubting the principle.

In revenge, one day, when she and I were coming back home, she said :

"Oh, there's the concierge's cat."

And she gave him bang on the face such a good kick that he really yowled, that wild beast of Madame Pontus's.

"Ah," she said to me, "now I feel better."

After Justine's marriage she went to live in the country, near Meaux, with her sister. Satisfied, I think. I was going to say happy, but that's a word that doesn't suit her. I must say that we hardly see each other. It isn't that we are hostile to each other, but no, things worked out that way. And what would I have to tell her?

All the same, I sometimes hear other people talk about their mothers. Or I see them in the street, mothers with their brats, who look pleasant and warm. Very young mothers. Fresh ones. Whose bottoms one would happily pinch. Well, I don't know how to explain that but in the rue du Borrégo the mothers are never young. Mine, however, when I work it out, when I was six, she was only thirty. And thirty-six when I was twelve. That's young, that. And Champion's mother who got married at twenty and was already expecting Edgar, from what mother said. And yet they weren't young. Neither one nor the other. They were both tall women, my mother with a square face and a rat-tail of hair which always hung down her neck. Madame Champion, looking like an Indian squaw, with an aquiline nose—but on the whole, alike, made to the same pattern, always serious, even tragic, always with the look of having emerged from a catastrophe, wearing blue aprons with checks either lighter or darker and which smelt of water and dampness. Each word has its own smell. For me the word mother has a rough smell, like the taste of an unripe pear—little pears, not good ones. Go and be sentimental about that. The smell of wet floors. Disinfectant. And in the rue du Borrégo they were all like that. Or rather, no, there were two types. The type of Madame Magis, Madame Champion, Madame Goddet. The strong ones. Then there were the thin, plaintive ones, the

crushed cats, whose baskets were too heavy. The type of Madame Nabure. But not young. None of them. Not old either. Ageless. In fact not real women. For us, when we said women, we thought of everything except our mothers. Now, perhaps, in the rue du Borrégo, the mothers were not entirely mothers—or not entirely women. Because they COULDN'T AFFORD IT. Because that was what they said. That was the end to the end of all their reasoning. The excuse for everything. Madame Champion would say:

"I could look nice, I'd be no worse than any other. But I can't afford it."

Especially since she didn't wash very much. Or my mother:

"Emile, do you think that pots of jam just grow here? Just look how much you've put. Do you think we can afford it?"

My father would come back in a good mood.

"Well, folks, tonight I'll take you all to the flicks."

"The flicks, Victor? At three francs a seat? And the boy needs a pair of new shoes."

"All right," said father.

And he went out alone. He went to play billiards. In a café, where he easily spent the twelve francs which would have done for the cinema. Justine pointed out the fact.

"Your father needs a change."

"Why father and not us?"

That was true. Everything taken into consideration.

"Anyway the flicks would have been just as much a change."

"Be quiet, you don't know what you're talking about."

So they quarrelled. To see who was right. AS THOUGH THERE WAS ANY POINT IN BEING RIGHT.

Note that I don't insist, that I don't try to hide behind poverty. Poverty is an alibi, also, and it's not worth any

more than the others. You'll say all the same, perhaps that explains . . . Not at all. Nothing explains anything, that's my motto. I leave explanations to Champion. And that one especially. Oh, he uses it, don't worry. The day when the bloke will leave an explanation alone without sticking his nose into it . . . In his confessions he writes: 'I know that sensitive people are offended by my novels. But gentlemen, it is the voice of misery that speaks.' You see the excuse. The alibi. But it isn't true. I've known him too well, Champion. He's a swine, that's all. I don't say that he hasn't got talent, no. He has. AND OF THE FINEST KIND. But he's a swine. He thinks like a swine. He would have been the same if he was rich. Instead of stealing his aunt's knickers he would have stolen the maid's. Was that preferable? While he was about it, it was still better that it stayed in the family. Or perhaps it would have taken another form, a more refined one, with the pansies in the parc Monceau. Or with petrol cans of his own instead of those belonging to the garages. But at bottom . . . a LITTLE influence, perhaps. A scrap of influence. I don't deny it. Nothing more. It's a lie to say that misery = Champion. But swine + misery + petrol + knickers + Académie Française ambition + something else = Champion, that's perhaps more serious.

Besides, even while reasoning about it, I've let myself be taken in again. I was talking about being poor and here I am already in the midst of absolute misery. It isn't the same thing though. But that's Champion. His trick. Always using one word for another. 'The voice of misery, gentlemen.' Save for the fact that neither he nor I, nor his parents, nor mine, have lived a miserable life. NEVER. We weren't rich, agreed, but real misery is something different. We didn't eat stuffed turkeys, but we weren't hungry. We didn't have central heating, but we weren't cold. Except at school. But at the Polytechnic,

too, from all one hears, it isn't always so well heated. When I think of what my father earned, taking the cost of living into consideration, it wasn't so bad. But of course there was the system. The system of being poor. Or rather the poor form of the system. Of which we were prisoners. Note that I don't complain about it. If we'd been rich we would have been enclosed in another system. Padlocked just as firmly. Just as full of lies. So I don't complain. I just indicate the fact, to be complete. For example, there were lots of things, my exercise books, socks, packets of vanilla chocolate, that it would have been worth our while to buy wholesale, in shops which give reductions or who sell thirteen things for the price of twelve. Do you think my mother ever did so? Note that she had money. But it was stronger than her.

"In our situation you only buy just what you need."

Or else she went three times in one month as far as the Denfert-Rochereau district to buy a pair of socks on three different occasions. She could have done it all at once, but that would have broken her heart. Mother inherited money when grandfather died. Eleven thousand francs. But the following month when she had to buy a new bed for Justine, who was getting a bit taller, my mother still bought it by instalments. Whereas by paying for it cash she would have had a rebate of ten per cent. Because of the system, always. For whom are things sold on instalments? For the working class. So we buy on instalments. With money in the drawer and the rebate that passed us by.

"We're so much in need," she would say.

With a smile of assurance. With an air of saying . . . of saying I can't think what because I think she wasn't sure of what the words meant, since she talked in the same way about the cobbler in our street:

"Oh, he's so much in need, that man. He re-soled Emile's shoes for me in two hours."



## CHAPTER 5

As for sex, frankly, when I was a kid, it didn't worry me. Once, in the rue du Télégraphe, a woman who was having a quarrel showed her behind, in pink knickers. I remember this because I had the idea of telling the story when I got back home and I got slapped for it. By my mother. If I hadn't been slapped I shouldn't have been struck by it. Because I was slapped I told the story again to a friend, at school, a little red-headed boy who became a dentist's assistant in the rue des Moines.

"Oh," he said, "tell me what it was like."

That was bad. Once he had said that, I couldn't find anything to add.

"Well, it was big and round. Pink."

"So that I can think about it," he said.

I myself didn't think about it. Later, for some time, I even believed that I must have been a backward child. Half asleep, somnolent. But now I've learnt how to look at things directly, I realise that I was simply a child like lots of others. Like lots of others who also didn't think about it. Champion, of course, says that the opposite is true. He recounts things, conversations, which aren't in fact untrue, which I remember too, but he forgets to make it clear that they were exceptional. Sometimes of course we did venture into mysterious things.

"Old chap, I tell you that babies come through the navel."

But we often talked about other things. About the Tour de France. About Douglas Fairbanks. No connection. As far as importance goes. Respective importance. Ten times about the Tour de France compared to once

about the navel. Or perhaps we would talk in a little group. Two or three boys. Champion precisely. Because he has always been dirty-minded. I've said so already. I didn't think about those things. I had my crust of bread. And the fire and the strawberry jam. Those are the three things which in my childhood had much more importance than the rest. And still I only recognised their importance later, when I started to go to bed with women and I realised . . . One must say first I suppose that all the world is like that (but it is all the same incredible that people are reduced to SUPPOSING over things which are so important)—I must say then that when I make love my mouth waters. I don't slaver, oh no, but I have more saliva, and it's more frothy, more solid in some way. And not exactly at the moment of going to bed, but at the moment when I realise that, apart from a catastrophe, a fire, or an earthquake, my pleasure can't be taken away from me. On the stairs for example, the legs of the woman in front of me. Or when someone's voice gets husky, as you might say. Or, more simply still, when the woman starts to undo her clothes. You see what I mean? Good. Well, this quantity of saliva, I used to have it too when I was a kid. And over three things: the crust of bread, the fire, and strawberry jam. Not at the same time, though. They followed each other. Like three affairs. With short periods of overlapping, the crust of bread which didn't give way all at once to the strawberry jam. And even sometimes I went backwards, I had a comeback. A piece of bread and jam when I was already in the fire stage. Like three affairs, I say it again. Exactly.

Note that it was only strawberry jam. Not other sorts. The apple jelly, for instance, that my aunt sent us from Meaux, gave me rather cool and light ideas. Syrup would give me well-considered ideas, a taste for taking my exercise books and drawing beautiful lines with

a ruler, in red ink. It wasn't disagreeable either. But strawberry jam, that made my mouth water. Definitely. With the big strawberries, still almost whole in the juice. I went all soft. I would think of soft things. I would languish. I don't know how to say it: the soft feeling began to live in me, my saliva began to swell in some way and you might have said that my blood got thicker and that it became saliva too.

As for the fire, that didn't come until much later, when my mother had swollen legs and my father decided that in future it would be I who would light the fire in the morning. At first I grumbled. What was the point of having a mother if you had to do everything yourself? Then I discovered that lighting the fire gave me the same pleasure—almost, because there are shades of difference that I leave out, or I'd go on for ever—the same pleasure as the crust of bread and the strawberries. Not laying it, but at the moment when it burnt up. The match, the moment of anxiety, and then woof! the yapping sound as it drew through the matchwood, the flames, the purring sound. And something came into me that at that stage I didn't know how to explain, but which I recognised later on and which was exactly what I feel at the moment of going to bed with someone: it was like some slow-moving animal which seemed to stretch itself out along all the length of your body.

## CHAPTER 6

All that isn't very exciting, I realise it myself. Champion's aunt's knickers are obviously more amusing. And reassuring. On the surface. Because in the long run, everything considered, who is reassured by the knickers? Those people who have stolen knickers themselves but who didn't need Champion any more to reassure them. After all, this mania is known. It's in order. Catalogued. But what about the others? Those who liked petrol? They're just where they were before. Shut in as they were before. Because of Champion. Who gives himself airs because he had confessed to something WHICH HAD ALREADY BEEN CONFESSED (and who, while he waits, remains in the inside, with his petrol). But as for me, I really want to come out of my prison. And to take other people out with me. Because there are two things: either I am alone in having experienced these things, alone with my cold and my jam and all right, I am abnormal, a monster, someone unique, and let's say no more (although it might interest the scientists). Or else I am not alone. There are perhaps hundreds of others. So someone has to begin, hasn't he? Somebody must say the first word. Love, too, the most simple kind of love, somebody had to mention it first. Someone who must have written like me, risking everything, trembling with hope, not knowing where he was going. Somebody who also took himself for a monster. Like me, with my fit-as-a-fiddle business, who believed myself to be abnormal until the day when I discovered that lots of other people were like me, including a doctor who was very well known and had the Legion of Honour. Perhaps it'll be the same thing with the crust of bread, the

fire and the jam. All these things around me like a prison, but perhaps they are only an imaginary prison. Or a prison where there are a thousand of us, which is the same thing. Everyone believing himself to be a monster. Everyone with this secret WHICH IS ONLY A SECRET BECAUSE NOBODY TALKS ABOUT IT. Because a thing that nobody talks about but which everybody knows, it isn't really a secret, is it? So you don't believe that what I'm writing can be useful? And don't you believe that he could have rendered a different kind of service in telling the petrol story rather than the story about the knickers? Even if it were only for science, for the progress of knowledge. Think that there are perhaps hundreds of children whose ignorant parents let them poke about in garages without knowing what harm they are doing themselves. While if Champion had taken the pains to explain things well, with his talent, with his authority, there would already be a professor studying the question, who would publish his conclusions and suggest a remedy. And there would be a volume entitled: Championism. Its dangers and treatment. Fame, what. Instead of that, my aunt's knickers. Little timid confessions. And then if he only got to the bottom of things. If he treated the question in full. He doesn't think of that. He speaks of it as though it was a joke. 'With a twisted laugh. Vagueness. The system. Your aunt's knickers, fine, but what did you do with them exactly? Do you think he explains that? Not at all. I send you a book: there are three dots. But then why start to talk about it? What use is it? To deepen the mystery further. It's like love. Ever since men have talked of it, ever since they've written about it, they ought to know what they are dealing with. Nothing of the sort. You're in the secret up to your neck. In spite of what I've read, I don't know for instance if other people find their saliva getting thick like I do when I sleep with someone. Always vague. Dots. Or

a blank space in the text. Like the sheet on a bed. But in love, the sheet doesn't serve to hide things all the same. It has another use. Which you can't get away from. With the three dots, like the frontier line on the map which nobody cares to cross.

Now, I who speak to you . . . But careful. I'm going too fast. I was already going to speak of an incident which only happened much later. Just a moment. I must go quietly. A book like mine only has a meaning if I leave nothing out. Even if I have to repeat myself.

I must first say that when I left school at the age of fifteen I got a job with Dufiquet in the rue Fontaine, office furniture, manufacture and sales, wholesale of all kinds. EVERYTHING FOR THE OFFICE as it was written on a large banner hung up at the back of the shop. (Because, if you believed Champion and the others, a man's motto should be 'Everything for love'. Or 'Everything for sex'. Whereas, at Dufiquet's there were thirty-two of us, between the ages of fourteen and seventy, living with the motto: 'Everything for the office'.) It was a good firm, a solid one, in the slightly dusty category, with two big windows which never changed. At the same time my father had decided that I should continue to go to evening classes because like that, he calculated, after I had studied the manufacturing side, I could become one of the leading employees of the firm. Fine. I agreed. In any case with me, it's very simple, I don't ask anything better than to see other people making decisions instead of me. I don't argue, I assure you. It makes me tired to decide myself. It bores me. I put things off as far as I can. If I have the choice between a bus and a tube train, I wait until I'm on the spot before I make up my mind. Always hoping that there'll be a sign at the last moment. I work hard though. Conscientiously. Even with scrupulous care. Monsieur Dufiquet had noticed it.

"When Magis makes a mistake, you can be sure it's through stupidity, not carelessness."

Only I don't like making up my mind, that's all.

Important facts about the factories and shops of Dufiquet:

1. My salary: 350 francs the first year, 1,220 francs the fourth year, going through different stages.

2. The smell of glue in the binding shop, a smell which gave me migraines, which meant that I never understood this side of the business very well.

"It doesn't matter," said Monsieur Dufiquet. "I don't know the binding side very well either."

But my mother said:

"I'm ashamed. A man should be able to stand anything. What will you do in the Army?"

The system. I've been in the Army and I never came across the smell of glue.

3. The conversation of my colleagues and my first true encounter—chronologically speaking—with the system.

I must explain myself a little on the last point. As I've said already, sex didn't worry me. And at first, it still didn't worry me. In spite of the talk by the others. In any case, they didn't talk about it much. Monsieur Dufiquet didn't make jokes about such things. Of course, if you believed in the system it should be the contrary. The corruption of workshops is well known. It may be very well known, but I can assure you that nobody tried to corrupt me. I did it myself in the end. Because sure enough from time to time bribes were put in front of me.

"How's your girl, old man?"

Or:

"Have you been to the rue de Châteaudun yet?"

My age too, I suppose. In short, when I was nearly sixteen I decided that things couldn't go on like that and

afraid, I think. I'd heard stories about diseases. I was also afraid that they would ask me for too much when I had gone too far and I wouldn't have known how to refuse. Or the vague impression that I had that professionals were reserved for important people. Besides, when I think that when I was over twenty-seven there was still one once who refused to go with me because she thought I was too young and I had to take her under a street-lamp to show her my papers—then you can see why at sixteen I would have been put off. And then I don't explain. I merely point out. So, no professionals. But apart from that I tried everything. All types of woman. All varieties. All ages. And I only encountered two rebuffs.

I don't even speak of the very young ones, of whom one might think that they were more frightened than me. Who refused through fear, before even really asking themselves the question. With whom one should have shown oneself to be more daring than I was. More convincing. Nor about those little cheeky girls who like a good laugh so much that they would do without a man for the pleasure of sending him to hell. No, I don't speak of them. With the young ones, the ones with nice curves, the possibility of being refused was foreseen. The system accepts it. I accepted it too. But the others? The mature ones? The ugly ones? The hopeless ones? The plain ones? The modest ones? The dreary ones? In the long run, I attacked anyone, nice women who all the same couldn't have had so very many chances, who should have jumped at me like poverty jumps at the world. And nothing . . . Nothing! One day, there was one of them in the Place Vaillant, sitting on a bench and obviously dreaming. Empty then. Available. And what would a woman be empty of then, if not of love? I sat down on the bench. She didn't say anything. I looked at her. I put on a dim expression. In the end she asked me the time. Ah, I said



to myself too. The time, exactly. The classic approach. I told her the time. And then I went on. I spoke. I made a proposition.

"What?" she said, "I don't understand a word of what you're talking about."

She was surprised. She really looked like someone who hadn't understood. However, a man who speaks to a woman, to a woman who's dreaming—on a bench—you might think that it's all very easy to understand.

"I don't understand. What were you saying?"

I made an effort. I articulated clearly.

"We could go and have a drink. Together."

"Together? What for?"

That's how she was, the dreamer. Thunderstruck. As astonished as if I'd suggested planting a tree. WERE THERE REALLY WOMEN WHO SIT IN SQUARES THINKING OF OTHER THINGS THAN LOVE? WERE THERE REALLY WOMEN WHO GENUINELY WANTED TO KNOW THE TIME? For whom it isn't an excuse? A woman on a bench. And who asked the time. Anybody would have understood. Even if I'd never made any proposition, I can already hear people laugh.

"And you didn't understand? You aren't half stupid." But it wasn't that. Not that at all.

There was another, a big gawky thing, not pretty but well enough put together, at the corner of the avenue de Clichy and the avenue de Saint-Ouen, standing still, waiting for I don't know what. She looked at me. I stopped. I went and stood beside her. I tried to speak. It didn't come easily. I opened my mouth. I constructed the sentence. I articulated. Nothing came out. I must have looked all right. It's true that she didn't look at me any more. Finally, as a result of my articulations, I spoke. She began to laugh.

"Now it's nice and fine," she said, "go for a walk instead. That'll make you just as tired and it'll bring some colour into your cheeks."

Can you imagine that? Colour into my cheeks. What about my soul, madam? And yours? And one's feelings? Don't they exist then? And our desires? The dominion of the flesh? This desire that pierces us all? In any case, it didn't pierce her, I can swear to that.

There was another one, in the passage of the Châtelet underground station whom I'd been following for a moment or two and who suddenly turned round and gave me a bash on the face with her umbrella. And another, also in the underground, but in a carriage, seated opposite me. I pushed my knee against hers, she drew back, I insisted, in the end she put her tongue out at me, an enormous tongue in a face convulsed by fury. Fury, I don't exaggerate. And why? WERE THERE WOMEN WHO WEREN'T FLATTERED WHEN YOU MADE ADVANCES TO THEM? And what about the system?

Still one more, a very young one this time, in the Galeries Lafayette, who was a salesgirl in the ironmongery department. She had slipped in stepping down from the pavement. I caught her arm. We talked. We arranged a meeting. She came. I even think she found me to her taste.

"I'll get into trouble," she said.

But she stayed with me until eight o'clock. Walking. Love, what. At the third meeting I risked a proposition concerning a hotel.

"Oh," she said.

With a disappointed expression.

"Are you that sort of man?"

That sort of man? What sort did she want me to be?

"There are low-down women who'll do that for twenty francs."

Thanks for the information. But what about the system?

One more again, a fat woman who always wore slippers and who lived in our block of flats and of whom it was said that she brought home two men at a time, and mother even pretended that she made advances to my father. I didn't dare speak to her. So I sent her a letter—without a signature and written in block capitals—drawing her attention to the little Emile Magis who was apparently wasting away for love of her and to whom she need only say one word. I thought it was tempting. Well, after that she never even answered when I said good morning to her. And once more, why? First, how could she have guessed that I had anything to do with the letter? And even if she had guessed it, wasn't it flattering? But one must assume that it hadn't flattered her.

Nothing. Always nothing. You can laugh. I didn't laugh. I with my obsession. My obsession that didn't belong to me, God knows. That I found all around me. Everywhere. My friends would say to me at the workshop:

“Last night, old chap, I saw a bit of stuff walking about showing off her tits.”

Women for them seemed to grow between paving stones.

I went to the cinema: men coming into offices and getting hold of typists they'd never seen before and off they go. It was true that that was in America. I opened a book: 'I was seventeen when the little maid from upstairs. . . . ' Or my cousin. Or the lady on the first floor. I opened a paper: 'The streets of Paris, their temptations.' I went to the music hall:

*Puis voilà qu'un soir  
Sur le bou-le-vard  
Eune p'tite femme meu dit  
Viens donc par ici  
J'te ferai le truc du léopard*

Everywhere. You might believe that men never thought of anything else. As though the sky wasn't the sky any more, but an immense behind sitting on top of the world and coming down slowly. Like a fortress around us to which everybody had the key. Everybody. Except me. Everybody thinking of sex. Except precisely the women whom I spoke to. As for other people the doors were wide open.

"Hell, I'm going to have a girl tonight."

As though it was straightforward. As though it was enough just to stretch out your hand. I came forward in my turn: the doors were shut. Why? At what signal? How did people recognise me? What was the mark on me? Other people just had to want it. 'I'm going to have a girl tonight.' They went out. They found one. Not me.

And I began, in this domain too, to feel different. To feel alone. To feel abnormal. A leper. I all alone in the face of a world where everything happened differently than for me. I facing the egg.

This well-closed egg, shut all round, where men and women only had one gesture to make, one word to say, in order to find each other again, to understand each other, to mix together. How did they do it? That is what became for me, for years, the horrible question: WHAT DO OTHER PEOPLE DO? They went out. They found a woman. Straightaway.

On an even keel with life. For them, when a woman asked them the time, it wasn't to know the time, it was for something else. But why? Why for them and not for me?

"I said to her, shall we go for a walk? O.K. she said."

A dead cert. And I? Where was I in all this? Shall we go for a walk? They sent me to hell. Talked about the colour in my cheeks.

And I began to tell lies. Like the others. (But I didn't know yet that the others were telling lies.)

"Well, Emile, still a virgin?"

"Good God, no."

"Tell us."

I told just anything. But with despair in my heart. Always asking myself: but what do they do? What do they do so that what I have to make up really happens to them? I make it up like a half-wit Busy with telling lies without thinking one moment of wondering whether they didn't lie too. Without thinking for one moment whether, while I was telling the story, there wasn't someone else in the workshop asking himself the same question, saying to himself: "What? Magis too only has to hold out his hand? He who looks so dumb? What about me?" Because that's what the system is. That's the strength of the system. It's because everybody, with his lies, reinforces it. Because NOW I know that it's a lie. Because now I know that all that is only an image of the world that men hold before them and that they hold out to each other and WHICH IS FALSE. No, careful: it isn't really false, but it's false as a system, false as an image which people try to make us think is FORCED to be true. There is the lie in the circumstances. Not the contrary of truth, but the deforming of the truth, presenting as inevitable what is only probable, like a principle which is only the average of a set of statistics. Do I make myself understood? It's like the man, woman, bed. Obviously nine times out of ten that adds up to the total: sleeping together. But it isn't FORCED to make that total. Because there remains

a tenth time which is just as possible and just as normal as the others—and which has therefore the right to exist. I don't say that my friends lied when they talked of the girls they picked up easily. I say that they lied in not speaking of all those who had sent them to hell. Because by not mentioning them, by suppressing the possibility, each time they reinforced the system, they reinforced that image of the world where it's enough to want to put your behind somewhere for you to manage it. This picture of a world where apparently people only thought of that, when in fact for three quarters of the time they thought of something else. Oh, it isn't new. Already in ancient times, from what I've read, people had invented a whole band of gods who lived like they did, but on a bigger scale, more easily, with more air. The system is our mythology. Do you want a woman? Nothing easier. Walk up and down the streets and you ought to find one. You OUGHT TO: the system. OUGHT TO, nine times out of ten, is a phrase from the system. The principle instead of the reality. I SHOULD HAVE found. The trouble was that I didn't find.

I know, I was ugly, I didn't know what to do, I should have insisted. Fine. But precisely. What then must one think of a system which depends on the shape of my nose or my sentences as to whether it works or doesn't work? Where is the seriousness in that? The guarantee? Women told me to go to hell. Was I a monster then? I thought so. I suffered as a result. Now I've discovered that it was just that they probably didn't want to. Or else they were in a hurry. Or that they weren't thinking about that and that they said no without having thought about it properly. All things of which the system makes no mention. Because, according to the system, every woman does only that: waiting for love. But my woman on her bench in the square, do you think that she was waiting for

love? And every woman is flattered by the advances that you make to her. But the one who put her tongue out at me in the underground, do you think she was flattered? Without counting the days on which, even if she wanted to make love, a woman couldn't. Those things happen, though. Regularly it must be said. They happen. Except in anecdotes. Except at the flicks. Except in the novels of Champion. By this detail alone you can judge the truth of the rest. And then, did I set about it the wrong way? All right. If I had done it differently the same women might perhaps have said yes. Certainly. But the women and I would not have been different for that reason. We would have been the same women and I. With the only difference that we would have been to bed together. Then where is the reason in that? The decisive reason? The inevitable total? Things would have fallen out differently, that's all. Things work out or don't work out, that's the real rule, the key. All the rest: system. Half-truth on half-lie.

## CHAPTER 7

This morning the post brought me a weekly paper which devotes an article—unfortunately too short—to the **MAGIS AFFAIR**. My photograph, one of my wife and one of Dugommier. The article is fairly interesting, but of course, entirely off the point. Fortunately in fact. Although in one sense this is also annoying. And too short. I repeat. MUCH too short.

I showed the issue to my colleagues.

“My poor friend,” said Tufieux. “It should be forbidden to bother. . . . to persecute. . . .”

Probably the term ‘bother’ didn’t seem to him to rise sufficiently to the occasion.

“To go on persecuting a man with these. . . er. . . speculations . . .”

That’s the sort of remark that I have to listen to. People who’ve never had an article written about them and stick their nose in. . . . Whereas the article, in spite of its inaccuracies, delighted me. But I agreed, with a devastated look. I hoped to benefit from the circumstances in order to pass on to Tufieux a piece of work that bored me. But he objected.

“Oh, listen, Magis.”

Men’s hearts are very limited. So what.

For the moment I was busy talking about my virginity and the difficulties that it was giving me. I mustn’t exaggerate either. After a certain length of time all the same I did lose my virginity, and in fact on the 12th December, 1926, between nineteen hours ten and nineteen hours twenty in a hotel room in the rue Germain-Pilon. I mention the date because I remember it. But I’m annoyed



at remembering it because that shows to what point and during how much time I've been a prisoner of the system. A complete prisoner. Memory included. Because according to the system, this event has its importance. And a considerable importance. It's true, ask people to tell you about their youth and they'll always manage to put this incident in it, with two or three details. As though it were Peru. It's perhaps true in fact. FOR THEM, I can't say. What I say is that for me this episode had no importance. If I remember this date it's by pure submission to the system. If it's not that I can search in vain, I can find neither the traces nor the influence of it. I can't see what it changed. Once the thing was done I didn't think of it any more. Or in any case I thought about it much less often than for example I thought of this woman who put her tongue out at me in the tube. Seriously. You'll say to me, what, a woman who simply sent you to hell? I'm sorry. A woman is always a woman. Let us see: two women go by. One says yes, one says no. Why should one be more important than the other? Because one enters into your life and the other one doesn't? Exactly. Why is an open door more important than a closed one? Didn't she want to? But that's the precise importance of it. And of the woman in the tube particularly. Just think, for having this idea of putting her tongue out at me, with such hatred, such disgust, such frenzy, such luxuriance, I might say, she couldn't have been an ordinary type. If I'd had an affair with her don't you think it would have changed me in an odd way? I might have become, I can't imagine, a gangster, a brutal type, bloodthirsty. So, BY REFUSING ME THAT, don't you find that she really did take on an importance? Responsibility. Without counting what she taught me simply by putting her tongue out at me. The expression of hate that she had. Hate, there isn't another word. As though I had

trampled on the child in her very womb. If she could have killed me, she would have done it. Don't you think that that's important? To learn to what point you can be hated? Rather than so-called love? Besides, it's very simple, I can still remember the woman who put her tongue out at me. I can still see her face, with greasy skin like a negress. Whereas I've completely forgotten what the woman was like on the 12th December in the rue Germain-Pilon. Completely. If you killed me I couldn't think of her name. I wonder in fact what she told me. It was in the tube. A guard had just shut the automatic gate in our faces when we should have had plenty of time to go through.

"Oh, what a nuisance," said a woman's voice. "Someone's waiting for me."

"Let us go through," I said.

The man didn't even answer.

"Mean thing," said the woman.

"That man enjoys this sort of thing," I remarked.

He gave us an unpleasant look. That already brought us together in some way. He opened his gate again as slowly as possible.

"There are some really awful people in the world," the woman confided to me.

In short, when she got off the train, I stayed with her. We drank something in a café. I can still see all these details. The café, the man's face. But I've forgotten her face. I think she was a blonde. Would-be blonde. Blonde verging on not much of anything.

"Which way are you going?"

"I'm going to the rue Damrémont."

"May I go with you?"

Then, as we went past a hotel:

"We could go in."

"We could."

We went in. Not in that hotel. In the next one. Because we had already passed the first one and a soft sort of feeling spurred us on which we might have lost in going back on our traces. It was a room like a corridor, the furniture was not arranged but lined up along the wall, it was so narrow, with a light not in the middle but at one end, over the washbasin, which made the end with the bed look like a sort of tunnel. Nothing gay in fact. And in the tunnel was the would-be blonde, stretched out, with one arm over her eyes, just letting things happen, without moving, not at all the smart type. And as I didn't really know where to start, you can see the mess I was in. Perhaps it's that which confuses my memory. I remember the mess more than the woman. I said to her :

“ You know, it's the first time that I've ever loved anyone like that.”

I thought that might move her. That she would sit up. Press my head against her breasts. Show some comprehension. Express her happiness. A virgin, just think of it. But not at all. From underneath her arm she said :

“ It isn't true.”

Perhaps she knew more about it than I did? Thinking about it afterwards I wondered if she had understood properly, if she had not taken my words in the sense : I've never loved so much. I've never loved to this extent. Again one of the characteristics of the system, always looking for things in what one says which aren't there. I should have said, you know, I'm a virgin. But would that have had any more effect? I wonder. I suppose that it's one more rumour that women go crazy over virgins. In any case, the second time, which was with another woman, later on, I told her as clearly as possible.

“ You know, I'm a virgin.”

She replied:

"I don't mind." No more delighted than that.

As for the would-be blonde, I had made a date with her for the next day. She didn't come. I tried to think of the reason. I didn't find it. In short, I repeat, an incident that was void, without significance, without interest. If I'd dreamt it, it would have been the same. Less the thirty francs hotel bill that I could have spent on something else.

No, for me, the real event at this period, the one which changed me, which left the strongest impression on me, was this one. I came back, one evening. I was still living with my father and mother. I arrived. The staircase was pitch-black. I switched on the light. Nothing happened. I said to myself, it's a breakdown. I climbed up. Arriving in front of my door I took out my key, I stretched out my hand. I put it into something soft. Into fabric. Into a body. I was frightened. I LEARNT fear. At first, there was a sort of skin of ice between my body and my clothes. Then something broke inside my chest—on the heart side—something which, in order to express it better, collapsed, and its sides, like walls, slid against my thorax, weighing down on it, almost breaking it. Then I cried out.

Well, it was all just a joke. One of my father's jokes. He had seen me in the street, and because of the electricity breakdown he had waited for me in order to play this joke on me. Oh, yes, my father was a jolly type. To play jokes on people was his great joy. And he laughed his head off.

"Go on, Emile, you were afraid; admit it, Emile."

But I could not come to myself again and I was still trembling and it was since then that I've been afraid. Afraid of everything. Of sound and silence. Of shadow and twilight. Nothing was ever the same for me since then. A cat has only to dart between my legs and I cry

out. The things which collapse from the side of my thorax. This sort of dreary madness, immobile and close: fear. Which each time removes something from my span of life, I can definitely feel it. Which wears me out. Like an illness. As though I were an epileptic. And my father laughing his head off. Coming triumphantly into the flat and telling the story.

"A good one! Yes, that was a good one. Come on, Emile. Admit you were frightened."

I could have really hit him. Wasn't there cause for it?

"Yes, that was a good one." And the murderer? Do they do good ones too, the murderers? A joke! But a joke which ruined me for ever. When I think that everywhere throughout the world, children are left like this way at the mercy of their parents. My goodness, it makes me shudder. Hit him! He deserved to be hit a thousand times. But (the system) you don't hit your father. Fortunately I refrained from doing it. Simple as they are, people would have said that I had hastened his death. Because he died, it must be said. Soon afterwards. From peritonitis. I was even sorry. Seriously. But was my feeling sorry just part of the system again? Go and find out. It was contagious too. My mother cried. Note that she only cried when people came. That's another characteristic. There she was, let us say, preparing an omelette. Someone arrived. A visitor. Madame Champion. Or Madame Nabure. My mother dried her hands on her apron and there, she began to cry. Like that, without any warning, like the face you pull at the photographers. All her features which moved, arranged themselves in a certain order. And a curtain of tears. Then, when the visit was over:

"All right," she said.

And she went back to her omelette, with her everyday look. It wasn't that she didn't feel sorry. No, no. But

tears for her were a sort of luxury, I believe. A luxury that she could allow herself during visits—when, in any case, she had nothing else to do—but which, when the visit was over, had to be put back in the wardrobe, like a coffee pot only used on Sundays, and give way to the work of everyday. So it seems to me. I try to explain. Or perhaps she saw it as a kind of politeness, in order not to deprive people of their pleasure, so that they hadn't put themselves out for nothing.

I was annoyed too. Because it was just at this point that I was thinking of taking somewhere and going to live on my own. And then crash, I had these two women on my hands. Note that from a material point of view they didn't need me. Justine earned her living very well. But always the system. Uncle Eugène, who was a police constable when he retired, said:

“Emile, these two women have nobody except you.”

So I stayed. That made always a third person for quarrels. How they quarrelled, those two women. I would come home. I found them treating each other like dirt. For nothing. But both of them absolutely intent on being right. Desperate at the idea that the other had had the last word. I would say: “Oh, that'll do.” Then they turned against me. “You've no character,” my mother would say. “You look as though your girl's left you,” added Justine. Left me? Me? Who'd barely finished with my virginity! But that's the way of the world. The vain babble of the world.

## CHAPTER 8

SO, I REPEAT, the episode of the rue Germain-Pilon: no importance. None at all. A wisp of smoke. A dream. A revelation, people say. It seems that going to bed for the first time is a revelation. But a revelation of what? Go and find out. Let us imagine that you've never read a newspaper. Fine. I take hold of you by the collar and I say: a newspaper is this, that and the other, so many inches by so many, with photographs in the middle and print all round. Fine. Then I show you a paper. Will it be a revelation to you? The same thing for love. Even before the rue Germain-Pilon I knew what it was. I had managed to get an idea. I knew how a woman was made. Without counting the fact that I didn't really see the would-be blonde, because of the bad light and also because of my embarrassment. My mind was occupied. That restricts observation, you can't think, everyone knows that.

Was it a disappointment? Other people say that losing your virginity's a disappointment. That people say to themselves, is that all it is. Or that they feel sad. Or that you find yourself POLLUTED. That you want to have a bath. People feel so many things. Personally I didn't notice anything. Neither during nor afterwards. But I will tell you that I didn't expect anything special, I assure you. I had the impression rather that it was going on outside of me. Nothing more.

What I felt really was that going to bed for the first time was like a sort of turnstile which, when passed, introduced you once and for all into the system, into the freemasonry of the people who know where to find women who say yes, who are always ready. But not at all. From

this point of view things remained as before. The same set-backs. The same rebuffs. The same solitude. At six o'clock, crossing Montmartre, the charm of youth, all that for nothing. Nobody. They're still going to laugh at me. So much the worse. I've said it already, a book like mine only has a meaning if I accept the risk of people laughing at me. Anyhow what people will laugh at me? Silly people, those without brains. Who've never looked at themselves. Because what am I talking about here? Solitude. And who has never been lonely? Who? I'm not the only one however to have suffered solitude. Note that I thought I was. For a long time. Me on one side and opposite me, the mythology, the men who lived like gods. But I don't believe that any more. Why should I be exceptional? Why me precisely? So, if they laugh at me who will they be laughing at, the idiots? At themselves. At this little bit of themselves that they try to get rid of. At this bit of themselves on which they have caused night to fall.

And is there anything to laugh at anyway? Do you laugh at men who wander in the desert and never find a well? It was the same thing for me in the streets. With this torture in addition, that the wells were there. The women who passed me, who brushed against me. And I saying to myself: there must be, all the same, there must be, in the midst of all these women, one who is also searching. Who would be happy to. And whom I don't recognise. Whom I pass. Who calls me and whom I call. And we do not hear each other. One finally, in the hall of the Gare Saint-Lazare, at least forty, I think, with her face like red brick, with little eyes. I spoke to her. She replied. I made a proposition.

"Ah," she said, "you should have said that before."

She looked at me. With her little eyes, like nails. She wanted to, I could see that.



"For once I'm in Paris, it would have pleased me."

"Well?"

"You should have said so before."

"But why?"

"Because I must catch a train."

"What time's your train?"

"Seven thirty-two."

With an identical movement we both looked at the illuminated clock over our heads. The big hand moved just at that moment. Like an old man with a nervous tic. Eleven minutes to seven.

"It would be too much of a near thing."

"Oh, no!" I said.

We stood there, looking at each other, weighing things up. Was it worth the trouble?

"No," I repeated. "Come on."

But I didn't see her again either. She only came to Paris from time to time. And I was all alone. Always alone. *Tête à tête* with my own behind. Until the day . . . Because here finally is the incident, the curve, the turning. The thing that counts. The gateway crossed. One evening, I went to the cinema. Before me, at the window, a woman was getting her ticket. I got mine. We went in. One behind the other. The usherette came up, with her little light like an index. She led us in.

"Here?" said the woman, pointing at a free seat, all alone in the middle of a row.

But the usherette, misled by appearances, thinking she was doing the right thing, said:

"Wouldn't you prefer to be together?"

"Of course, of course," I said.

Even now I don't know what got hold of me. There are some men who have presence of mind. I'm not one of them. I hadn't even looked to see what the woman was like. I had no particular desire. But the words had come

out just like that, dictated in some way, brought forth before I had the time to think about them. Spontaneous, what. Spontaneous! I WHO HAVE NEVER MADE A SPONTANEOUS GESTURE. Never. There again is a characteristic that I ought to note. Other people speak and move before reflecting about it. Or at least it happens to them sometimes. I think it does. As far as you can judge from the outside. You might say that they identified themselves with their gestures. Not me. I see my gesture in front of me even before I've begun it. I hear my words before I've opened my mouth. And I find them so silly, so useless, that generally I give them up. Or else I turn and twist clumsily, with my sentence already in front of me, my gesture already cold, waiting for me, but I never manage to find it.

But finally, this time, the words came out. Spontaneously. I didn't even feel surprised about it until we were already sitting down, the woman and I, beside each other.

"Well, you've got plenty of cheek," she said.

"Ah, ha," I said.

Flattered. And flustered too. Because with this 'of course, of course,' it seemed to me that I had just finally gone through THE GATE. This gate which neither the woman of the rue Germain-Pilon, nor that of the Gare Saint-Lazare had succeeded in getting me through. The gate to the world where one KNOWS, where gestures and words come to you of their own accord and fill exactly the space that awaits them.

Note that it didn't last. Once my words were out I fell back into my astonishment. For a moment I had stopped seeing myself. But now I saw myself again, very far off, very small on a little piece of a planet, in a cinema seat with a number and my coat tightly round me. She was even surprised about it, the woman.

"Well," she said, "I should have thought you'd have more to say."

I did speak though, but I said words that didn't stick, which were no use for anything, which hung in the air. After the cinema, I didn't even insist that we did anything. The woman had even mentioned her husband. I said to her:

"Shall we meet again?"

"Do you want to?"

"Enormously."

I put some feeling into it. I think I even waggled my elbows, like a penguin. Tomorrow? No, the next day, that wasn't good. The day after tomorrow? All right. In front of the station Richelieu Drouot? Agreed.

Now it was the next day that I stole something. Was there a connection between these two episodes? Yes. Yes, I don't hesitate to say so. Yes, precisely BECAUSE I AM NOT A THIEF. You'll say . . . In fact, on a certain day, it happened that I stole something. But you're not a thief because you once stole something. Now, since then, it never happened to me again. Never. I have been even scrupulous instead. Not long ago a booking clerk in the underground gave me two books of tickets for the price of one and I went up all the stairs again to tell her so. That's something. But I wasn't shy either. And moreover I had said 'of course, of course'. There is the connection, precisely.

Let me explain the circumstances: Monsieur Dufiquet, at this period, had put me in the shop in order to initiate me in the small day-to-day sales. Not very much in fact because the firm did mainly wholesale business. But there was a customer who had just chosen some cash books. I went up to the cashier's desk to wrap them up and at the same time I said, for the benefit of both customer and the cashier:

“So, for this gentleman, that’ll make three hundred and seventy-five francs.”

The client took out a five hundred franc note and offered it. Mademoiselle Duvant checked the watermark. She had a thing about watermarks. And on top of that Monsieur Dufiquet came out of his office.

“Mademoiselle Duvant, have you got change for a thousand francs?”

In his nasal voice.

Mademoiselle Duvant got agitated—she gets agitated over nothing—if ten centimes are missing she upsets the whole shop—she got agitated.

“Certainly, Monsieur Dufiquet. We were saying: a thousand francs.”

She didn’t worry about anything except the ten-hundred-franc notes, she put the customer’s note down beside the till, she gave him his hundred and twenty-five francs, while the five hundred franc note stayed there all on its own, forgotten, just where the cash desk touched my packing table. The customer went away. And I finally put a sheet of my wrapping paper on top of the note. And Mademoiselle Duvant closed the till again and took up her cross-stitch work.

Well, this gesture, this wrapping-paper pushed a little further over than it should have been, this covered-up note, this gesture, I risk the statement that it wasn’t like me. I hadn’t SEEN this gesture before making it. It wasn’t forced to emerge from the muddle out of which generally all my gestures, all my words, have to disengage themselves. It was, once again, a spontaneous gesture. Like the ‘of course, of course’, exactly like it, not mechanical, for how would I have been able to make mechanically a gesture which wasn’t like me? but accomplished in a sort of gaiety, of happiness. In a sort of intoxication. Like the ‘of course’, I repeat it. Similar. Entirely. Like

two gestures making the same act. Like a follow-up. People will say . . . I know, this urge, this happiness, it was the day before that I should have benefited from it. It was the day before that I should have let myself be carried away. In carrying further the advantage I held over the woman. In taking her with me after the cinema. I know. But I didn't do it. I should have done. Logically. I know. But logic and the present conditional are one thing and reality is another. And the reality is this: the day before, I didn't do anything. Because, I suppose, of my astonishment. That 'of course, of course' seemed to have opened for me a whole series of doors, and in the distance, a landscape so unexpected that I couldn't avoid stopping to look at it. Like a cyclist on top of a hill. It didn't prevent my bike from being still there, between my legs, my happiness, my urge, my spontaneity. And it was all that which came back to me in the shop . . . My liberty. Like a bike, I tell you. Which carried me along. Which lifted me up. Which swept me off, even in spite of myself. Which should have, I know, led my hand round the woman's waist, or under her skirts, but which, although braked and slowed down, acted all the same in pushing it, FAUTE DE MIEUX, towards the five-hundred-franc note. Ah it was different, I can assure you, from the room in the rue Germain-Pilon. That was how I really lost my virginity, really, not between the rue Germain-Pilon and the gare Saint-Lazare, but between the 'of course, of course' and the sheet of wrapping paper put down over the note. Because, in the end, what is the loss of virginity? A man, a woman, a bed and something wet, or is it rather performing an act of which you have no idea before and which transforms the world for you? Oh, no, I assure you . . . it was on this wrapping paper that I, personally, lost my virginity. The real virginity. Because remember that, the real virginity is once more a question of the SOUL.

Note that this time too, it didn't last. Three minutes later I was already very worried. My liberty subsided. States of grace don't last. I would have given a lot for Mademoiselle Duvant to have found her note again. But not a bit of it. She was doing her embroidery. With little nervous movements. Sometimes she looked up to search the dark corners of the shop, with an anxious look. Worried rather. More than fifteen years in the firm and still she never opened a door without looking as though she were saying 'Good heavens, whatever shall I find behind this door?' Mademoiselle Duvant was an old maid. About forty. With a big nose. A wide flat bun, or rather a roll. Her cheekbones always highly coloured. A big ravaged face as is so often the way with people to whom nothing has even happened. (Stop! System: Mademoiselle Duvant had at least as many adventures as Landru, worries like him, remorse—but they were over things which are unjustly called trifles: her pussy cat's milk, the concierge to whom she had perhaps said good morning without being nice enough, the gas man who had said something that she couldn't manage to understand.)

In short, after an hour, the note was still there, under the wrapping paper. In the end I came nearer to it again, under the pretext of tidying up, and I put it in my pocket. Good God. Since I had taken the trouble to hide it. Logically, in fact. Without counting the fact that, if I'd pretended to find it again the Duvant would still have made a point of shouting at me.

"That wrapping paper that you push about everywhere. You'd better change that, my boy. Just think. A little more and that note would have been lost."

And she'd have told Monsieur Dufiquet. That would have led to interminable goings-on. No, I was OBLIGED to pocket it. But I was worried. The afternoon dragged. Finally, about half past five the Duvant said:

"Ah! I'm going to do my till."

Solemnly. Putting down her cross-stitch with a movement of her wrist like a woman in a film who gives back her jewellery. After a few minutes there was an upset in her corner. She pulled out the cash drawer violently. She only had a low-hung lamp which bathed her hands, her drawer and her money in light but which left her face in darkness. After all, what's the use of a cashier's face?

"But how . . ."

She sighed. A short, worried sigh.

"Six, seven, eight . . ."

"Something wrong, Mademoiselle Duvant?"

It was I who spoke. From my dark corner.

"What?"

Over the pool of light I could imagine her anxious face. Not because of the till, not yet, but because of habit.

"What?"

"I said, something wrong, Mademoiselle Duvant?"

"Leave me alone, I'm totalling up."

Totalling up? She only had one sum to do. Why say totalling up? Vanity again. Fine. Then the agitation stopped. Mademoiselle Duvant was still. That lasted for one moment. Then she said:

"Emile."

"What, Mademoiselle Duvant?"

I was so relieved that I almost cried out. I'll tell you: I was impatient to be involved in the thing. I would have liked to be active, pretend to help the Duvant, lift up the registers, look on the floor.

"No, nothing," she said.

Always this lack of confidence. Such a sad thing. Instead of speaking. But she preferred to go on looking all by herself, in her shadowy grotto, mumbling round in the circle of light. At one moment, in order to look under the table, she lowered her head into the light. In a quarter

of an hour she had changed. Unbelievably. Her roll had come undone, a strand of hair hung down over her forehead. She began to look like one of the mothers from the rue du Borrégo.

Then suddenly, she shut her drawer. With a measured step she crossed the shop. She knocked on Monsieur Dufiquet's door. I saw Dufiquet's long face over his desk in a yellow light. The door closed. Then opened. Monsieur Dufiquet came into the shop looking like someone who's been disturbed over nothing.

"Now," he said, "don't worry about it. You must have made a mistake."

"Monsieur," she said, "Monsieur Dufiquet."

Her voice was confidential.

"What?"

"The young man . . ."

I was the young man. She was certainly worried about mentioning it in front of me. She was always so proud.

"Well, he belongs to the firm, the young man. He'll help us. Won't you, Emile?"

"Certainly, Monsieur Dufiquet. What's it about?"

"It's Mademoiselle Duvant, there are five-hundred francs that she can't find."

There I can tell you I had a shock. Five-hundred francs? But how did that happen? I had calculated in my corner that the gap must be six-hundred and twenty-five. Good God, the five-hundred that I'd taken and the hundred and twenty-five that the Duvant had given to the customer. Even that had seemed immoral to me. I'd only wanted to steal five-hundred. And then the damage was six-hundred and twenty-five. Do you think that's fair? But while I waited I was really astonished. Five-hundred? How did Dufiquet know? For one moment I thought that it was all a trap and that the Duvant had seen me. But they didn't seem to think of that. Neither of them.



Monsieur Dufiquet counted the notes.

"It's true all the same," he said.

Mademoiselle went to pieces and began to cry.

"Monsieur Dufiquet, I swear . . ."

"Of course, Mademoiselle. It's a mistake, that's all. It happens. Or a dishonest customer. But never for a moment did I think of suspecting you. NOT FOR A MOMENT, Mademoiselle."

With his long face very straight. That's what makes a man grow up, being able TO SHOW HIS ESTEEM.

"Not for a moment. No, no. Just think. All the time you've been with the firm. Almost the longest of anyone, isn't it?"

"After old Jules."

She put him right—but between two sobs.

"Yes, after Jules."

After that there was a silence. We looked at each other. Monsieur Dufiquet and I. As though we were wondering what to talk about.

"Look," said Dufiquet.

He hesitated.

"Look, this five-hundred francs, well, I want to do something. You need only pay me back half, Mademoiselle. Yes, half. And when you can. Don't worry about it. Between now and the end of the month, for instance."

It was the 22nd.

And it was six o'clock. You could hear the staff from the workshops going home through the corridor which ran alongside the shop. Old Jules went by the two windows. Then Tronchard and Plan. Monsieur Dufiquet went back to his office.

"Well, are we closing, Mademoiselle Duvant?"

"I want to have another look," she said.

Fine. I went home.

The next day I found her again behind her till, looking very off-colour, her eyes very tired, saying nothing. Obviously she didn't want to say any more about the five-hundred francs. But I WANTED TO TALK ABOUT IT. It's strange to say so, but it fascinated me. Like the men who've just lost their virginity and who never stop talking about it, who give details, who'd tell it to all the people in the bus. Well, I wanted to talk about the five-hundred francs. That definitely proves what I was saying before about losing my virginity on the wrapping paper. Because I didn't want to talk about the room in the rue Germain-Pilon. While I did want to talk about this. I wanted to relive the incident. I went again to the packing table, I pushed one of the sheets . . .

"Well, Mademoiselle Duvant, have you found those five-hundred francs?"

The heroine began to cry again.

"Emile," she said.

I reasoned about it.

"It isn't fair that you should have to pay it back. Even half of it. It must be a customer. It's not your fault if the customers are dishonest."

"It's my responsibility."

"We ought to make a collection."

I went into the workshops and spoke about it to my friends.

"What?" they replied. "In any case what's it got to do with you? Do you want to go to bed with her?"

It must be said that the Duvant wasn't much loved. Too proud. And she always looked as though she was giving herself more trouble than anyone else. That annoys people, of course. Monsieur Dufiquet sometimes sent her into the workshops. "Mademoiselle, will you go and tell Tronchard that . . ." Usually it was nothing at all. But she arrived as if she had brought Dufiquet himself. Like

a confidence woman. The others were fed up to the teeth with it. It was understandable in one way. One person who couldn't stand her for example was old Jules, on the stitching work. One day when she was passing on to him a recommendation from the boss and as usual she was making an incredible fuss about it, he said to her finally:

"Oh, that'll do, Mademoiselle Du-vant, not so much wind."

PRECISELY. The Duvant choked. Monsieur Dufiquet had to get angry.

"Jules, I forbid you in future . . ."

But Jules, like a good-hearted chap, hiding behind his old Chinaman's face, said:

"Oh, Monsieur Dufiquet, but I didn't do it on purpose. Duvant, I didn't remember that her name meant wind."

"Really."

Dufiquet had his sarcastic moments. Then, he said, clearly:

"Well, you should have done."

"But, Monsieur Dufiquet, does that mean that because her name is Du-vant and means wind there are things we can't talk about?"

"It certainly does."

"Sometimes there is a draught."

"I forbid you to mention draughts in front of Mademoiselle Duvant."

With the result that ever since, whenever she came into his workshop, old Jules began to sniff.

"Hm," he said, "that's funny."

Mademoiselle Duvant could have pretended not to notice. But it was stronger than she was.

"What's funny, Monsieur Jules?"

"Nothing, Mademoiselle."

He took his time.

“Nothing, Mademoiselle . . . Duvant.”

The others laughed. Behind her back Mademoiselle Duvant heard: “Oh, that’s enough, Mademoiselle Duvant, not so much wind.” She turned round. Everyone had his head buried in his work.

In short the collection idea did not please. I was just able to bring back ninety-two francs. Out of which fifty came from me. Mademoiselle Duvant thanked me. We spoke about the business again.

“Do you remember, Mademoiselle? There was a customer who paid with a five-hundred franc note. A man who took some cash-books.”

Why did I say that? I don’t know. Perhaps it was still the joy—or the astonishment—of having made this spontaneous gesture. This free gesture. Which didn’t seem like me. And then, something was worrying me.

“It was a question of three-hundred and seventy-five francs. That’s what I don’t understand. Because if the customer took his own note back again, he also took the hundred and twenty-five that you were due to give back to him.”

“Why yes,” she said intensely.

“So that ought to make a gap of six-hundred and twenty-five.”

“That’s true.”

She didn’t understand either. We went into infinite calculations. We even made an experiment. She gave me a five-hundred franc note. I came up. I gave her the note. She gave me the hundred and twenty-five. I took the note back again. Ah, it was exciting in quite a different way from the rue Germain-Pilon or the country lass from the gare Saint-Lazare, I assure you.

“Emile,” she said finally, “why do you take so much interest in me?”

Emile was taken aback. He didn’t know what to say.

And Mademoiselle Duvant who looked very odd. As though to say: something that I daren't believe, have my ears misled me? She was palpitating. She had a good deal of bosom and it heaved under her violet-coloured corsage.

At six o'clock, when the shop was shut, and I was saying good-bye:

"After all, we live in the same direction," she said. After all what?

"It's silly for both of us to go the same way on our own."

She who was always so proud. Who barely answered our good mornings. So then I said:

"Shall we have a drink?"

She, thinking: In a café? With a young man?

I didn't have much time though. At seven o'clock I was due to meet the woman from the cinema the other evening. But goodness me, in this café, with this Duvant woman opposite me, her hat, her narrow fur round her neck, her look of wondering what was happening to her, well, I just couldn't get away. The café around us, the marble circle of the table with its brass rim, the five-hundred francs, it all held me like a little piece of the world that I couldn't detach myself from, a little planet, a little universe. And she and I on top of it, drifting about, a long way away.

At half past seven I still hadn't moved and the Duvant had got to the stage of explaining to me that she wondered how she had managed never to suspect, she and then me, in this shop, who would have thought it? although one day though, but with the difference in our ages, Emile, madness, Emile, but a sweet madness perhaps, for I've got a heart, Emile, a heart that beats. And she got agitated. Her cheekbones were redder than ever. Her roll came undone. Her face looked even a little more ravaged. Panic in fact.

Everyone for himself. Passion. And I sitting there like an idiot. Why? Not daring to correct her. Just nodding assent. Stupidly. Why?

“Emile, how did it happen to us?”

“We can’t control our feelings, Mademoiselle Duvant.”

Why?

## CHAPTER 9

Yes, why? Even now I wonder why I finished up by going to bed with Mademoiselle Duvant. Why I finished by having an affair with her which went on for more than two years. Desire? But she was ugly. That is, pretty ugly. And she was TWENTY-FOUR years older than me. But this is still one more thing that I know now: desire or not, it doesn't mean a thing. You do three quarters of the things you do without knowing why. Or for the simple reason that they're there in front of you. There's a sort of big ox in your back, which doesn't look, which chews its cud and which pushes you into things. And the sillier a thing is, the more it pushes you. The Duvant business was silly, but it happened like that, one thing after another, one arising from another. I had said 'of course, of course' to a woman at the cinema. That led me to sleep with Mademoiselle Duvant in an old maid's room which smelt of coffee and short net curtains. We went to bed. Then she talked. Ah, that's her, that chatter. The number of nuts she could crack in an hour was unbelievable.

"I'm alone, you understand, Emile. For years. Without anyone to talk to. Except Pussy . . ."

And then, saucily:

"Will you allow me to catch up?"

Because she realised the situation. I even wonder if she didn't go to bed simply to make me be patient in between two topics of conversation. Personally, I don't think she was so very keen on going to bed. When I insisted she would say:

"Emile, you're so sexy!"

Note that I wasn't the first. Fortunately too. I would still have been embarrassed about it. She confided in me. She had lost her virginity to a cavalry lieutenant who had pinched it from her. When she lived in Clermont-Ferrand. Even though I laughed at it at first. A cavalry lieutenant, I said to myself, oh, that's fine, old girl, I know your little horse-rider, you've told that story before, it must have been a fireman. Well, not a bit of it. She showed me letters and photographs. Even the announcement of the engagement. He was really a lieutenant, and he was really in the cavalry and he even became a lieutenant colonel in time. At the Strasbourg garrison. Because here is another thing that I now know: conventional things do happen. And they happen even more often than they should. Obviously. Because why should a story become conventional? Precisely because it happens often. Isn't that true? Can you see what I'm trying to say? If I've ended up by talking so much about cavalry lieutenants à propos of stolen virginities, one must suppose that it happens more often with them than, for example, with dentists. From which the example is taken in fact. Contagion. Flour to the mill. Water to the river. A girl who meets a dentist, well, she's not thinking of anything. Or she's thinking about her teeth. Not about her virginity. While with a cavalry lieutenant, from all one hears, she thinks about her virginity. And when a girl thinks about her virginity it means that she's about to lose it. Everyone knows that.

Another thing that I wonder about is this: doesn't everyone have a COLOUR? From a certain age onwards don't they take on a complexion which shines through even in acts which apparently have a different colour? It is because, even when he has told the truth, a liar stops being entirely a liar for that reason? I don't say that all our actions resemble each other. No. You can, all at once, steal something even before your own eyes. Agreed. But



an action is not limited to itself. Generally other things result from it, follow-ups, consequences, continuations. And I say: even when the action is not like us, the consequences are. For example, the prisoner who escapes. Fine, he escapes. But if they catch up with him they add on a new punishment in addition to the one he was serving already. And his escape—which is however the most different thing from prison that you can think of—which is the exact contrast to prison—this escape BECOMES prison too. Translates into prison. Is added to prison. You'll tell me that the man can also succeed. Not get picked up again. Yes, because his prison is outside himself. But what about our prison? Which is inside. Escape? How? Through some action? Fine. Then, with your action on your shoulders, plus your action, you come back. You come back to your colour. At the cinema I had said: of course, of course. That wasn't like me. Then I stole something. That wasn't like me either. But how did all that end? By Sleeping with Mademoiselle Duvant. And that, I realise it now, was like me. A silly affair. Ridiculous. Of which I was ashamed. With a woman I didn't want. That was what I'd been brought to by these two actions so unlike me, these two spontaneous, cheerful actions, through which I had thought I was finding my liberty. I had left my colour: I came back to it. Wasn't it inevitable? Sorry, it was inevitable that there should be something. That five-hundred francs couldn't just stay there in the air without something happening. The same with anybody in my place. Old Jules would have drunk it. Little Léon, in the binding room, would have run to the brothel. Bosselage would have made it bear fruit. He would have started a little business. Perhaps he would have become a new Citroen. But, brothel or Citroen, something would have come out of it. Depending on the temperament of each one, in fact. Whatever you do, there's always a conse-

quence—and the consequence is like you. The consequence is in your colour. For me, nut-grey. The grey of a ship's hold. The colour of good-for-nothings. As a matter of course.

# CHAPTER 10

On top of that, my military service. I did it in Angers. Maine-et-Loire in fact. A pleasant town, I find, and one which made me see a little clearer. It was still grey, but the grey of all façades, tufa grey. Softer. Lighter. From time to time I went on leave. I went as far as Paris. Or sometimes, on Sundays, Mademoiselle Duvant gave herself a trip. She came to see me. Especially to talk.

“What a journey! That train! So many people. I’ve got my headaches.”

My headaches. She lived in the plural, that woman. My headaches, my totals, my ages. “A woman of my ages.” But do you think that her headaches stopped her from talking? Not for a moment. Everything went through them. Her old mother. Clermont-Ferrand, the gas-man, the neighbour’s child who had caught his finger in the door, her worries, her memories.

“When I see you in that uniform, Emile, I can’t help thinking of Roger.”

Roger was the cavalry lieutenant. The man who stole her virginity. In actual fact Lieutenant-Colonel Marinot.

“You aren’t cross with me? It’s so natural, isn’t it? And then when I compare you to him . . . And they wore different things at that time.”

I even, just to amuse myself, wrote to Marinot. A letter signed Gaston Duvant. Saying I was the fruit of his crime, and that his mother and I were struggling along in poverty, and that we should see what we should see. It must have given him an unpleasant moment.

Or else she talked to me about the office, about Monsieur Dufiquet.

"Oh, he worries me. He smokes too much. And always cigars. I wish he'd take to a pipe instead. It does less harm, I allowed myself to say."

She really did worry. She looked anxiously towards a threatened future. I assure you, I've never met conjugal feelings as strong as those between secretary and boss.

Or about old Jules who went on teasing her. Or about Monsieur Tongleur, the chief employee, who had peculiar habits, from what she said.

"But what peculiar habits, Blanchette?"

She blushed and pretended to be discreet.

"Perhaps I dreamt it. Or I'm just imagining things."

That would have interested me, however. But there was the system. Mademoiselle Duvant also was part of the system. And the system only admits habits which are rather quaint. Habits which are recognised. Which make people laugh. Not others. If Monsieur Tongleur had liked crossword puzzles or if he had had the habit of poking in his ear, Mademoiselle Duvant would have told me. Precisely because that's known. Because that's not interesting any longer. But Monsieur Tongleur liked something, he had the habit of doing something—and Mademoiselle Duvant didn't dare tell me. After that you can still be surprised that science makes no progress. Always the system. And I who complain about it, I myself as I write, how often haven't I been a victim of the system? How many times, when there were two things to say, have I not chosen the one most easy to express? The most easy precisely because it was already expressed in front of me. The most easy because it was already known and I only had to make a passing allusion, without the trouble of having to explain—but also without seriously having looked to see whether of two characteristics, this one was the most important, the most revealing. Mademoiselle Duvant, for example. I've said that she

got agitated over nothing. Fine. It's true in fact. But is it a really important trait, and in this respect, wouldn't I have done better to quote the following one: that 'when-ever she came out of the lavatories (the LAVATORIES), each time she had an expression of pride. Pride, yes, there isn't any other word. A reassured, satisfied pride. I heard the hollow rumbling of the cistern and against this triumphal background Mademoiselle Duvant reappeared, with a sure step and on her large face the expression of an empress, smoothing her skirts gently as though to calm some lion hiding beneath them. Don't you think that a trait like that tells you more about a person than saying stupidly like everyone else that she got agitated over nothing? Don't you think that it's revealing in another way? Or, now, about the lavatory cistern, there's also this that I forgot to tell at the right time and place: when I was a kid, I was terrified of this contraption. Of the noise that it made. Of the row that it let loose each time. So exaggerated, I found. So out of proportion with the smallness of the place. So I pulled the chain quickly and ran away with my heart beating like mad. These traits seem to be unimportant. Is that a reason for despising them? People never explain enough, that's my attitude. They never go far enough into things.

It's like my feelings for Mademoiselle Duvant. I've already got to my military service. At that moment, our affair had been going on for two years. And what have I said about it? Not much, certainly. People will have a wrong impression about it. She bored me, the Duvant. Definitely. She bored me, I wasn't wrong to write that. But I quite liked her too. In the long run. In time affection for her did come to me. Sympathy. Recognition. And rightly so. She looked after me. Knitted socks for me. When I left her, she wrapped my scarf round my neck.

"Don't take cold."

If I coughed, she made me a hot drink. Or warm milk with honey. Well, these things touched me. They pleased me. Especially when I made comparisons with my mother and my sister, who were always being rough with me.

"A scarf! A scarf now! What airs he gives himself!"

Or, because I asked for a warm drink, my sister said :

"A warm drink! No, but really! Are you a man or not?"

"Well, old girl, if you want to make sure . . . "

"Filthy hound!"

Because I was supposed to worry about my health. I WORRIED ABOUT MY HEALTH, that was what they complained about. BUT WHAT ELSE WOULD I HAVE WORRIED ABOUT? My mother? My sister? Who rowed me all day long. Don't you think that a little affection and a little solicitude would have pleased me? Well, Mademoiselle Duvant gave me this affection and solicitude. And it was nice. She talked a bit too much, agreed, but after a little time I had learnt not to hear her, a question of habit. She talked, I worried about my health, the hours went by. It was happiness, in its way.

I said also that I was ashamed of this affair. Exact. True. On condition that I added that this shame faded away fairly often. From time to time I certainly said to myself: Ah, if my friends suspected, how they'd laugh at me! "Magis sleeps with that old hag." But sometimes I said to myself too: well, the way she looks, and at her age, the Duvant only needed to have slept with Dufiquet for my friends to have envied me instead of laughing at me. They could have said: "That's clever, Emile's taken away the boss's girl-friend." Or else it was my mother who, without knowing it, reassured me. By her comments.

"Oh," she would say, "you've got another new pair of socks?"

"Yes."

She bent down and touched them.

"They're well knitted."

With the air of paying me a compliment.

And I once heard her say to Madame Pontus:

"Emile has a relationship with somebody really very respectable. She knits socks for him."

At Angers too, later, the other men in the regiment said:

"Magis knows how to manage things. He's got his hands on an old dear. Clever, these boys from Paris."

With envy. And that reassured me. Nothing so reassuring as being envied. You feel you're safe. As though you were on a pedestal. Mademoiselle Duvant took me to lunch at the *Ducs d'Anjou*, the best restaurant in Angers, on the boulevard, with windows two yards away from the pavement. My friends went by and stopped to look at me.

"It's nice here," the Duvant would say. "You ought to come here from time to time during the week. I'm sure you don't have enough to eat in barracks. You might easily fade away. With all this exercise."

And she slipped me cash. I accepted it, of course. Immediately. Without pretending. It didn't stop her from talking to me as though she had had to force me to take it. The system.

"Come on, now. Don't be silly. We know what it's like with soldiers. You know the song."

She even hummed it.

"*Au service de l'Autriche, le militaire n'est pas riche, la la la la.*"

The light-hearted type.

"Even Roger, you know. One day he had to pay a debt of honour . . ."

So it wasn't only her virginity that he took? What a twirp, all the same.

In short, as time went by, I even think I began to love her, Mademoiselle Duvant. But it didn't do any good because it was exactly at that moment that the thing broke up. Stupidly, I must say. I should make it clear first, that for when I went to Paris on leave she had had a second key made for her flat. So that I could sit there when I had to wait.

"You see, your packet of cigarettes, a good book . . ."

Good. Then, one afternoon, I was wandering about in the district.

"Well, and who's here!"

I looked. On the pavement in front of me, where she had stopped short, was a young woman, hair all round her head and topped by a beret, her teeth sticking out, her nose like half a circumflex accent, everything in bright colours, orange and brown, the gypsy type, but well nourished.

"Well," she said, "don't you remember me?"

"Well, of course."

No, I didn't remember, but I'd become a little more polite.

"We'll go and have a drink."

We went. The circle of marble between us, the rim of brass, the little piece of planet. She, with her bag in front of her and her hands on top of it.

"Ah," she said, "I sent you to hell good and proper, didn't I?"

Good. I saw what it was. One of those who'd turned me down. But which? It wasn't the woman who put her tongue out, though. Perhaps it was the one who'd hit me with the umbrella?



"And how!" I said. "I can really say you were tough."

She was delighted. "I had someone," she said.

In a reasonable voice. The meaning was: you must understand.

"I haven't anybody now."

In short, I took her with me. Without even wanting to. Stupidly. As one does sometimes do stupid things. It's true, something intelligent, which presents some interest, can't be done without reflection. But you do something silly just like that. As though you were pushed into it. Because the vertigo of silliness does really exist. And in order to make it quite complete, where did I take the woman to? To Mademoiselle Duvant's flat. I still don't know what got hold of me. Stupidity, I repeat it. Or the system of being poor perhaps. The distaste of paying for a hotel room while I had a free one in the district. Besides, it was only three o'clock and Mademoiselle Duvant never came home before half past six. But the trouble was that we went to sleep. Like logs. All at once, there was a noise, and I woke up. The Duvant! Framed in the doorway, like a picture, with her big face and her hat. And she looked.

"EMILE!"

That was all she could find to say. It wasn't very much? The circumstances must be taken into consideration. The unexpectedness of the thing. As for me, all that I found . . . It's true that I was dazed, heavy with sleep, terrified, because I was afraid of this big woman in her doorway frame, in fact, all that I found to say, but unconsciously, I swear it, found it I can't think where, was to put on the voice of old Jules and say:

"Oh, that'll do, Mademoiselle Duvant, not so much wind."

God, I thought that she was going to collapse on the spot. With her mouth open but uttering nothing, not a sound, and her hand slowly going up to her collar.

"I'll explain, Blanchette."

But she had already turned her back. I heard her cross the other room, go out on to the landing and go down the stairs. The other woman didn't disturb herself.

"Who's the old bag?"

I began to get angry. What, lie in her bed and then insult her?

"The old bag! She's my girl friend. And this happens to be her bedroom. So you've got to get out."

Oh, she wasn't half mad, *retroussé-nose*.

"Get out! Me! For that old hag! For that wreck!"

I wanted to explain things to her but she'd already got up, stamping about the floor, putting her knickers on furiously, getting both legs into one hole she was in such a hurry, falling over, catching herself on the frame of the bed, but without stopping spitting out insults.

"A woman like me!"

People go in for this sort of reasoning. What does that mean, a woman like me? When you get to the bottom of things. A woman like her? Would she have preferred a woman like any other? Always talking and saying nothing.

"Sod! Stuffy thing!"

Stuffed with what? Where's the logic of that?

"You're done!"

By whom?

"I might have suspected it. You've got a face like a peeping Tom!"

A peeping Tom? Now one thing that annoys me about people is their mania for using words in all the wrong meanings.

"Beast!"

She got hold of the quilt and trampled on it. A lovely white quilt, a knitted one.

"Leave that quilt alone."

In the end she left. It wasn't too soon. I tidied up a bit. Then I sat down. I waited. I was upset. I shouldn't have said that to Mademoiselle Duvant. Truly, I reproached myself about it. All that time since they had teased her in the workshops with that phrase. Ah, yes, I was upset. Then, who did I see arrive? The concierge. A little drip with a nondescript moustache that grew out of his nose.

"So, Monsieur Magis, I'm told that you've insulted Mademoiselle Duvant. In your position, that wasn't the thing to do. Now what I say is . . ."

In a kind sort of way. But I knew that the concierge couldn't stand me. The Duvant had repeated some of his remarks and allusions. It's curious how annoyed people get at the sight of two human beings who love each other.

"She's asked me to tell you to beat it. That she wouldn't set foot in her flat again until you no longer sully it with your presence."

"Just a minute," I said.

"And be quick about it."

I began to get angry.

"Now look here."

"Now look where?"

You should have seen his little nose over his non-existent moustache.

"Are you getting out of here or not?"

All right, that'll do. Where had she hidden herself, the Duvant? In a café, I suppose, so that she could watch my departure from behind a curtain. I would cheerfully have gone and looked for her, but the concierge was watching me from his doorway with a nasty look in his eye. I didn't insist.

# CHAPTER 11

I wrote to Mademoiselle Duvant once again. She didn't reply. I should have insisted. It's true, it was silly. Just when I was getting round to love her! And then go and make this mess. Sending that concierge! I had deceived her, yes. And in her own bedroom. Evidently it wasn't exactly tactful. But to go from there to . . . Frankly. And there was what I said too. I felt that it was that most of all that had hurt her. But in my letter, I said I was sorry. I explained the circumstances. So not replying to me was mean. All the same, I should have insisted. Risked visiting her. It's true that with this concierge it wasn't so easy. He would certainly have insulted me. And then, with me, someone's got to push me before I move. Nobody pushed me. Back in my barracks I let things slide. Somnolent. Taking days as they followed each other.

I must say too that I quite like this military life. I should have joined up again. I certainly thought about it sometimes, but good heavens, what a decision! I sometimes regret it. Just think, no worries, never anything to decide, you don't have to put yourself out. You're a small cog in a vast machine. And a machine which hardly ever moves. Things happen of their own accord. In the morning, when you wake up, there's no need to wonder what you're going to do. You go to the blackboard in the corridor. 4TH APRIL, eight o'clock: POLYGON. There it is, polygon. You go to the Polygon. Then in the afternoon you could lie on your bed. Or in a corner of the barracks there was some slow-moving job: polishing boots, peeling vegetables. You didn't care. That's exactly it: you didn't care. The world, life, things, you didn't care. And that's

a sort of happiness. Days with nothing in them. Provided that you always have a little backlog of sleep. So that you don't notice anything too much. Never to be too well rested: a wonderful secret. Hang about. Military life, in time of peace (and perhaps in time of war too, but I haven't got the experience), consists above all in hanging about, waiting. AND I LIKE WAITING. To be put down, anywhere, and do nothing except EXIST. To be there JUST for that. To wallow in yourself.

Then I felt well too. I thought about nothing. I hadn't got a woman any more? It didn't matter. That didn't worry me.

"What about your old girl, Magis?"

In a blasé way, I said:

"Too much wind. I sent her packing."

The system.

When my service was over I took two more days' holiday and then I presented myself to Dufiquet. I was already wondering how I would behave with Mademoiselle Duvant when I find in the shop, to my surprise, no more Duvant than on the back of my hand. There was a new cashier. Dufiquet arrived and made me come into his office.

"Ah! Magis."

He looked at me with a thoughtful air. Then, as though shaking himself:

"Our young man seems to be in good form," he said. You've filled out. I can see your military service has done you good."

And then nothing more. There was something wrong, I could see that immediately. Dufiquet was there like I don't know what. I explained things, that I had come back to start work again, and take up my situation, as it had been agreed before.

"Listen, Magis," he said finally. "I did promise to

take you back after your military service. That's true. The regard I had for your poor father . . . Besides, from the work point of view I had nothing to say against you. No, nothing."

The satisfied look of a man who dispenses justice. WHO IS GLAD TO SHOW RECOGNITION. Who pays tribute. Especially when he is preparing to upset you at the next corner.

"But I had a visit from Monsieur Prognon."

A heavy silence. I didn't understand.

"Do you know who Monsieur Prognon is?"

"No."

"Not really?"

"No, I don't."

"Prognon is Mademoiselle Duvant's concierge."

Oh!

"He told me something, Magis . . . I can tell you, you could have knocked me down with a feather."

His arms moved vaguely over his desk. To show me perhaps that he'd picked himself up again?

"That you were Mademoiselle Duvant's lover. Oh, I know that your private life has nothing to do with me. Agreed, agreed all round. But the thing's there, isn't it? And you don't . . . In other words, Magis, how old were you at that time? Nineteen? And you were the lover of Mademoiselle Duvant who was . . ."

With his arms stretched out. The man who gives up trying to understand.

"Well, it worries me."

The meaning being: I can't do anything about it, it's stronger than I am. The objective gentleman.

"Yes, I would feel unhappy about working with a boy who was capable . . . who was capable of going to bed, excuse the expression, Magis, who, well, was capable

of going to bed with Mademoiselle Duvant. A boy of your age."

Then, forcefully:

"IT FRIGHTENS ME, MAGIS. The thing is that after that I'd always wonder what you might be capable of next. I'd wonder if you weren't going to strangle me."

He was really sincere. I could see that.

"On Mademoiselle Duvant's side too, it frightened me, and . . ."

He became solemn again:

"And in spite of her long service, Magis, I dismissed her."

"All right," I said. "I understand, Monsieur Dufiquet. I understand perfectly."

Then I added:

"And what about Monsieur Tongleur?"

"What about Monsieur Tongleur?"

"He has peculiar habits. Is that any better?"

"Peculiar habits? What are you referring to, Magis?"

"Oh, well . . ."

I'd have found it difficult to explain. That blasted Duvant who hadn't wanted to tell me.

"So now it's slander. You go too far, Magis."

In the meantime, Dufiquet wasn't half upset, I could see that. His confidence in Monsieur Tongleur was shaken to the roots. He was going to watch him. At the slightest oddity, the slightest peculiar word he would go up in the air. And Tongleur would be uneasy. Wondering whether. Both of them bothered. Poisoned.

But all the same this meant that I was out of work. On the streets, in a way. I had to start looking. Small ads, making efforts, seeing people. After three months I found myself a niche at Rivet's, a big wallpaper firm in the rue Brochant. I had barely started there . . . Whoa! Halt! HALT! The system. There I am falling back into the

system already. If you stop watching it for one moment you find yourself back with the system on top of you, right on your shoulders, weighing down so that you come back to its habits and its falsehoods. The moment Mademoiselle Duvant is buried there I am—because I can see another woman on the horizon—there I am rushing along, leaving out important details. Careful. It's not the story of my sex-life that I'm telling—like Champion and the others. It's MY story. With my soul. My sex-life can wait for a moment. My behind can go and sit down! Because a behind is ALSO made to sit down on; men never seem to think of that. And why should it be more important lying in a bed than sitting on a chair, one of those waiting room or corridor chairs, exuding anguish, where you wait to be seen by a director. Women! Always women! Look at Champion! But look at your life. Look at it carefully. Without letting yourself be blinded by the system. Is there a single woman in your life to whom you've given as much time as to your office? You have, let us suppose, a little girl friend, all chubby and as sweet as anything. And on the other side a personnel director who is as ugly as sin, who scratches his knee, who walks in a revolting way, who is called Dieumevant or Brondechaise. Fine. Well, what frightens you most, which is the most terrifying prospect, to hear the chubby girl say to you: 'It's all over, my sweet, I'm leaving you,' or the revolting man saying: 'Sir, you're dismissed'? Well, answer! Honestly. Without exception. Nine times out of ten. I think that . . . But the system? The system according to which love alone counts? Shot down, the system. What is life, then? I tell you: greyness with the occasional flash of lightning. Something soft with occasionally something hard (a tile, for example, or a lamp-post). Nothingness with an occasional tragedy. But what tragedy, what tile, what flash of lightning? Women? The Champion version? Not very



often. Because, what's a woman in the end? As long as she doesn't marry you, as long as she doesn't pass a disease on to you, a woman changes NOTHING in your life. Or only shades of meaning. The frills. The festoons. The foam. WHEREAS A DIRECTOR. Ah, that's different. A man who's looking for a job, who has some hope, who takes steps, who asks for a recommendation, who received an encouraging telephone call and then a letter which says that there's definitely nothing doing, with much regret, there's the real tragedy and it's much starker, I can tell you, than stories about women, Champion and fellow travellers.

I talk of experience. I know what a man without women is like. I've lived it, I've suffered from it. But I suffered mostly because I thought about it. Because I know now that there are plenty of men who live without women and who never think about them and who aren't the worse for it. Whereas a man without work has a perpetual tragedy, a solid one, which you can't get out of, which you can't escape from. Whether you think of it or whether you don't. In that case you're worse off. What is worst of all, is that you don't exist any more. You feel yourself to be nothing, dirt, like an old rag, a bed-spring in a ditch. In the midst of all those men who come and go. Each one with his ambition. Each one weighing things up. I don't weigh anything up. Out of work. Without reason. I disappear and the world will not be affected by it. Not changed. I don't even leave a gap. Nothing. Another tragedy, I tell you. Another solitude.

A personal vision? A Magis vision? Ah, but excuse me. When you find out about someone, what do you ask first? As the first piece of information. In order to have an idea of the person straightaway. Who he sleeps with or what he does in the world? Answer without wriggling out of it.

Somebody talks to you about another person. They tell you :

"He's not married."

Does that worry you? No.

"He may have a girl friend, but I don't know who."

Does that bother you? Not at all. Does that make you think? No.

"Nobody knows what he lives on."

Ah, there's the shiver of horror. You feel bad. 'You don't know what he lives on? But your man's dreadful! No job? That's really very disturbing. And you want me to shake hands with him? Just a minute!' Isn't it like that? That shows clearly what is important. Where the essential point lies.

Note that in the circumstances I didn't even worry about my daily bread. I always had my meals and my bed with my mother and sister. But how they despised me for those three months . . . Reproaching me. Reducing me to nothing. Pushing me to the edge of nothingness. We would talk about going to the flicks. I would give my opinion. Before, they listened to me. I was the man. Now . . .

"That'll do," said Justine.

"After all," I risked saying, "that bloke Henri Garat hasn't got all that much talent."

"That'll do, just try to earn half as much as he does."

We spoke about Uncle Eugène. I risked a critical remark.

"You can talk. At twenty-two you haven't even got round to getting yourself a job."

Or my mother, with tragedy written all over her face :

"But what did you do to Monsieur Dufiquet? You must have answered him back, I'm sure. With your bad character."

There it was! Everyone will have already noticed that I'm a rather weak character. Too much so, in fact. I sometimes reproach myself for it. But in every family it's accepted once and for all that the son has a hopeless character. My mother said to Madame Pontus:

"The trouble with Emile is his character. He doesn't know how to obey."

I? What a description!

"It does us harm in all the neighbourhood."

Just what I was saying before. It's true that a good-for-nothing son is a drawback, obviously.

"I'm going to talk to Monsieur Dufiquet myself."

"It's useless, mother."

"Why? I'm your mother after all."

After all what? Where's the connection? Then Justine said:

"And do you think it's nice for Gustave to have a future brother-in-law with no job, who's out of work? It can even ruin my marriage."

"Oh, you aren't married yet, old girl."

That made her livid.

"Jealous thing! Louse! Your girl must have left you!"

It was lucky she died. With her tendencies she might easily have finished as an epileptic.

"You impotent creature."

That's family life.

Gustave was my sister's fiancé. A bloke about five feet tall, smaller than she was, rather like a Toby jug, pot-bellied already, and a little bald, with a big long nose, a head rather like a pear in shape, but distinguished. An accountant. In a bank. The National Bank for Commerce and Industry, on the Boulevard des Italiens. A bloke with a future, certainly. If one believed him, in any case. Listening to his own voice. Never saying a word, however

stupid, however negative, without looking all round to see if everyone was listening to him carefully and appreciating him. Repeating things if necessary. And if I happened to be distraught, he would say:

“It looks as though Emile doesn’t agree with me.”

Not unkindly, though. But Justine kicked me under the table. And when Gustave had gone she would say:

“He’s your brother-in-law. You must be polite to him.”

Oh, he was certainly appreciated. He was cock of the walk. The best arm-chair (the only one in fact). At table he was served first. BEFORE MY MOTHER. Note that he protested. But there was nothing to be done.

“Just imagine, Monsieur Gustave,” said my mother. One day there was chicken.

“I like the leg,” said Gustave.

In a voice like a bell. His big nose like the clapper.

“Really? Me too,” I said.

With a look full of deference to signify that I was flattered at sharing his tastes, that I felt myself honoured. When my turn came, I took the second leg. I wasn’t half put through it. Apparently I should have left the second leg for him. For his second helping. The tact! The delicacy of feeling! The politeness of it!

“Did he say he liked the leg or not? So what? You did that out of nastiness. To do me harm. To prevent my marriage.”

“Oh, all right. Next time I’ll take the parson’s nose. Perhaps he’ll understand the allusion.”

Crash! The racket began again. I was revolting. I had no respect for anything. Not even for my sister.

“I was referring to the parson’s nose.”

“Exactly.”

Go and work that one out.

## CHAPTER 12

It was then, practically at the same time, that I went to Rivet's and there was the development between Gustave and Justine.

It must be said first of all that I got my job with Rivet precisely thanks to Gustave. It was a friend he had in the firm, also an accountant, who called himself Lepreux and who had told him of the vacancy. And one evening Gustave arrived with the news. Solemn. Exhaling the thing. Conscious of what he was doing. The benefactor type. But at the same time knowing that he must be nice, putting himself within your comprehension, explaining things.

"Ah, it wasn't easy. I had a struggle. But I managed."

Justine looked at him with moist eyes. And my mother said:

"Monsieur Gustave! Say thank you to Monsieur Gustave, Emile."

"You'll do me justice, won't you Emile? I don't give my recommendations to anyone."

He kept coming back to it all evening.

"It was lucky I was there, Emile."

"I'm sure of it."

"And now let's be friends, Emile. Your health, old man."

Ah, it was a good evening. A family party. Justine saw herself already married. My mother poured a liqueur down her throat.

"In honour of the good news."

All reconciled!

"A good firm, you know, Emile. They wouldn't have taken anyone who happened to turn up."

I winked at him. I couldn't think what to say.

"Come here, Justine."

He put his arm round her waist. My mother wiped away a tear. Tenderness. Gratitude.

Only it must be assumed that Gustave did not appreciate feeling as much as all that. The following week his visits began to be rare. After coming for dinner every other evening we didn't see him any more. Justine got visibly gloomier and gloomier. Or else she never said a word during the whole of a meal, my mother sighed. But you can imagine that I refrained from asking questions. Other people's worries? I wouldn't be so silly. One Sunday morning finally there was Justine very happy with curlers all over her head, talking to me nicely.

"What about Gustave?" I ventured.

"I'm spending the afternoon with him," she said.

Then:

"Poor old chap," she said, "your tie's really too horrible. I'll buy you another one."

Her round face was all lit up like a lamp, almost pink, whereas her normal colour was somewhat nearer to yellow. The Chinese girl, as they called her in the district. But I was pleased for her. At bottom she wasn't bad. During these famous three months without a job she had sometimes slipped me a little cash. To go to the flicks with. At bottom . . . But generally I had to deal with her surface.

To be brief, after lunch she flew to her Gustave. I went for a walk. When I came back I found my mother and Justine in tears, both of them, sitting at each end of the table, their two faces, my mother's big face and Justine's round face, wet and swollen with tears, white with crying as though they had been soaked, my mother collapsing over a bowl of coffee, my sister clawing at the oilcloth on the

table. Tactfully, looking as though I hadn't noticed anything, I went to my room. But not a bit of it, they caught hold of me, they put me in a chair. I had to suffer the whole story: Gustave had broken it off. Precisely. He had sat Justine down on a bench, in a square, not even in a café, the beast, and informed her, immediately, there it was, a frank explanation was better, wasn't it, well, he'd made a mistake, he was really very very sorry, but he loved somebody else, a young girl whom he wanted to marry, that's how it was, in the circumstances, he knew very well that, but you can't control your feelings, he was the first to regret it but it was better really to discover it before rather than after in fact, and Justine would certainly . . . At this point, recovering from her astonishment, Justine had spoken. What! Not at all! Engaged! They were engaged! And now! Oh but! Oh, she must have let herself go, and in a square! I could imagine Gustave, all awkward, not knowing where to put himself. And Justine shouting louder and louder. That he was revolting! A seducer! Then, he was angry and went.

"How did he go?"

"Just like that. Without any warning. Without a word. I was talking. He got up. I thought it was just so that he could answer better. Not a bit of it. He'd already disappeared. One, two and he was through."

"Gone through like a dose of salts," said my mother in a deep voice.

I smiled.

"And so my unhappiness makes you laugh."

I made an effort to understand.

"Oh go on old girl, you'll find someone else."

I was treated as a heartless type.

"But if the man . . ."

Not at all. According to their point of view he had promised, he should keep his promise.

"Did he promise, yes or no?"

"He's a wretch," commented my mother.

"Exactly. What do you want to marry a wretch for?"

Justine: "Who's a wretch?"

Things didn't get any clearer.

"What happiness can you expect with a man who . . ."

"I don't care a damn about happiness, I want him to marry me."

"All right," I said.

I got up. They made me sit down again.

"Are you a man or not?"

In front of my mother it was an odd question.

"You ought to see that your sister is respected."

"Well, he hasn't insulted you, has he?"

"Hasn't he? What more do you want him to do then?"

"Ah, if your father was still alive!"

"What would my father have done about it?"

"He'd have brought him back by the scruff of his neck."

The energy that those two women had, it was murderous.

"You're the man in the family."

So, I'd become a man again now.

"You ought to go and look for him. He promised. You should insist that he keeps his promise."

"And if he doesn't want to?"

"You've only got to force him."

"How?"

"And you think you're a man!"

These allusions were getting silly. I couldn't take my trousers off all the same.

"And if he's unfaithful to you afterwards?"

"That'll be my business."

True.



“To-morrow. To-morrow you’ll go and wait for him when he leaves the office.”

I said O.K. I tried to get up again. Justine pushed me back into my chair.

“Tomorrow! Will you promise? When he leaves his office.”

I promised. Then I said:

“Ah, but just a minute.”

Good, I’d found an objection.

“He leaves his office at six o’clock in the Boulevard des Italiens. I leave mine at six o’clock in the rue Brochand. How am I going to find him?”

“You must ask if you can leave a bit earlier.”

An answer for everything, I tell you.

Fine. Next day. I got myself as far as the Boulevard des Italiens. Without enthusiasm, as you can imagine. What was I going to say to this creature? And suppose he told me that Justine was ugly? Could I go there to start a discussion about the charms of my sister? Oh come. That would have been **UNDIGNIFIED**. Wouldn’t it? On the whole. So I took up my stand on the pavement and waited. I saw Gustave come out. He looked cheerful, busy, in a hurry. With his nose. What was the matter with him? All of a sudden I found he looked less dumb.

“Well, if it isn’t Gustave.”

“Hullo, old chap,” he said. “Everything all right still? And how’s Rivet’s?”

Not the slightest bit embarrassed. Or rather he seemed to be thinking of something else, as though he was already carried away on to a different plane of thought.

“Excuse me, won’t you,” he said, “I’d like to have taken you for a drink, but I’m in a hurry.”

With this cheerful sparkling look all the time. Almost gay. Not specially directed towards me. He seemed to have become gay about life in general, the world, the

universe. As though he'd discovered something. A trick. A secret.

"The fact is, I wanted to talk to you."

He stopped.

"Did Justine send you?"

"Yes."

There we were on the pavement, with the passers-by bumping into us. The Boulevard des Italiens at six o'clock in the evening is not the ideal spot for a confidential talk.

"I'm in a hurry," he said.

Then, suddenly, he took me by the elbow :

"Come on with me, now. You'll understand everything."

We took the rue des Capucines. We went into a café.

"Good evening, manager."

Jovial. Although, to my taste, always a little too much of the benevolent. Type of: you see, my friend, I know how to put myself on your level.

We sat down.

"Listen," he said.

Then he stopped. With his eyes on the door, he stood up. Slowly. As though under a spell. And I was struck dumb. With astonishment. Because I didn't recognise him any more. He had changed yet again. The face of a child had risen to the surface of his features. A gentle, confident look. A look in which there remained nothing more than anxious and naked truth. Even his snout had become a nose again, not at all in the way, no longer arrogant, a nice little snout, happy and humble. I stood up too. A young girl was coming towards us.

"Here we are," said Gustave. "Darling, this is one of my friends, Emile. Mademoiselle Jeannine Blossard.

You'll understand, he'd said. How I understood! I was thinking about Justine. I looked at this Blossard girl. I understood. I understood everything. In any case I

understood Gustave. I didn't understand her because she had known how to find a Gustave. It's true that he looked as though he adored her. He devoured her with his eyes. He took her hands. Got agitated.

"Waiter! Waiter! Quickly!"

She was small but sweet. Pale, with a proud face, a skin all smooth, a nose short and straight. Not so very extraordinary, no. You meet plenty of girls like her. But never for yourself. Always on somebody else's arm. Or with their mothers.

They took no more notice of me. They talked.

"Have you had a lot of work today, sweetheart? You look a bit tired. No? Do I imagine it?"

With his nice little snout, full of solicitude.

And I stayed there. Wondering. Because if someone like Gustave could change like this, in front of my eyes, because of a woman, couldn't I change too? I'd had Mademoiselle Duvant. Fine. But certainly it struck me that there was perhaps nothing in common between going to bed with Mademoiselle Duvant and going to bed with a girl like that, so young, so . . . so pure, a strange word which I would never have thought of without her, as pure as a jug of water, as pure as a bathroom. Film bathrooms, not real bathrooms. And which ought to make you clean, in fact. With her little sentences that flowed out of her as though from a spring. Little sentences that washed gently against you. She spoke about nothing though, about her work during the day, about the shopping that she had to do in the district before getting her train.

"She lives in Courbevoie, you understand."

From time to time Gustave turned towards me to regale me with a detail.

"She lives in Courbevoie."

He told me as though it were something unbelievable,

marvellous. As though nobody had ever lived in Courbevoie.

"She works at the *Trois Quartiers*. In the publicity department.

With the air of saying: just look at that!

"Well," he said finally, getting up. "My dear Emile, I should have been delighted to have seen you but . . ."

"The fact is that I'd like to talk to you," I said.

Talk to him about what? Everything was said. But to see them get up like this, go off together, it broke my heart. All this happiness. This little light world. And me outside, as usual.

"I'm taking her home," he said.

"But that's all right," said the girl. "If your friend has to talk to you . . . I'll go and do my shopping and then I'll come back to pick you up."

Fine. She went. Gustave sat down again.

"I'm listening," he said.

I had to find something to say to him.

"First of all, allow me to congratulate you. I understand, you know. I understand you completely. She's terrific."

"You think so?" he replied.

Very vain. As though he had had anything to do with it.

"Yes," I went on, "I understand you."

Floundering. I took my courage in both hands.

"But there is Justine."

Gustave waggled his head to the right, then to the left, then once more to the right, forcefully.

"I can't do anything about that, old man."

"But you promised."

"I'd promised, yes, I admit that. And I was sincere, I give you my word about that, Emile. Sincerely, I thought I loved Justine. I thought that what I felt was love. But

now that I see what I feel for this little girl, I realise that it wasn't love."

Obviously. What could I answer?

"Yes," I said. "That's clear. There's no question of going back on that. But you see, what worries Justine is that she left you on such bad terms. With a quarrel."

"Oh, I don't hold anything against her," said Gustave, raising his hand.

Magnanimous. Nothing that makes you so magnanimous as walking out on a woman. It was curious. Once his little doll had disappeared and Justine was mentioned, he looked as dumb as a dodo. A dead dodo. Active and dead, that's exactly what he was, Gustave. Someone who agitates, but in the twilight.

"But she's angry with herself," I said. "She regrets it."

If she could have heard me! But what did I want in fact? Just to show her that I'd done something. To take her Gustave back to her for a moment. To have some peace. As for the rest, whether she married him or not, you can imagine how much I cared.

"You know how she is. Tact. Delicacy. So, you understand. Put yourself in her place. Look, you could come to the house one evening. You could speak nicely to her. Without bitterness. Don't you think that would be more polite?"

With that I think I found the words that were needed. He seemed to be touched.

"But how could we do it? I take Jeannine home every evening. Right to Courbevoie. And I stay to dinner."

Because he had dinner there too! Blasted Gustave.

"And she's proud, you know. Jealous even. You can't imagine it. 'Gustave, if you told me a lie.' She often says that to me."

"But for once. Tomorrow, look, you could come after the office. Just for a moment. Then you could go to meet her."

"For what reason?"

He was tempted. Is it so entertaining then to see the damage you've done?

"You can say that you've got to work overtime. That does happen. That you've got to stay at the bank until seven o'clock. That your boss asked you to."

O.K. Agreed.

"But only once, you know, Emile. I'm willing to go and explain myself. Sincerely. I do owe Justine that. But . . ."

With that, when you read what happened next, you'll take me for a swindler, someone who's very shrewd, you'll say I set traps or lay ambushes. Not at all. There, in that café, I swear it, I thought of one thing only: how to avoid a scene when I got back. With these two bloodthirsty women I had to have something for them to get their teeth into. I took back to them the impending visit of Gustave. Let them talk it over themselves. And leave me in peace. I only thought of the rest later next day, when I was in the office at Rivet's. One phrase of Gustave's kept coming back to me, worried me. I THOUGHT I LOVED HER, he'd told me. He had thought that he loved Justine. In good faith. Sincerely. One love like another, in fact. Then he had met this Blossard girl in her turn and the first love had faded away. Good. But this Blossard, in her turn, whom he THOUGHT he loved, how could he be sure that this time it was real and solid, that it would last? That it would last? That was where curiosity got hold of me. How long would it last? Against what disappointment? Against what obstacle? "Gustave, if ever you told a lie." And if she discovered that he *had* told her a lie. If only once. A love which would last. But would it last? How could

one know? And I WANTED to know. Love is important. Isn't it worth checking up? If she should learn for example that evening that it wasn't true that there was extra work? And at the same time for Justine . . . I was her brother after all. That counts, family.

In fact, to cut a long story short, I said to the assistant director :

"Excuse me, Monsieur Lochon, I've run out of cigarettes. I'm just going to the tobacconist's opposite."

"All right."

I went to the tobacconist's. I telephoned. To the *Trois Quartiers*. Publicity department. Mademoiselle Blossard.

"The staff are not allowed to receive outside telephone calls."

Outside what, fat face? And private life, perhaps the staff isn't allowed that either? What an attitude!

"It's about her mother, sir."

"All right for this once, but don't let it happen again."

"She's only got one mother, sir."

I heard him call: Mademoiselle Blossard!

"Hullo."

"Listen, dearie."

I held my nose in order to change my voice.

"Listen, that Gustave of yours, he told you that he had extra work tonight, didn't he?"

"But who am I speaking to?"

The usual thing. But behind it was her voice, a little unhappy voice which trembled. Which was already afraid. But without thinking of hanging up. Can't happiness defend itself, then?

"Never mind, little girl. But you may be interested to know that tonight, at half past six he'll be with his mistress in the rue du Borrégo. You can always telephone to his

bank at that time. Just to see. That's all for now, little one."

Well, seriously, I would have liked their love to have held out. Sincerely. I HAD to make the experiment. I had to check up. But I would have liked love to triumph. Let Gustave and his Jeannine explain things. But let them find each other again. It would have comforted me. But there again I had a disappointment. I don't know how it worked out, but after a few days, Gustave came back to the rue du Borrégo. To have dinner. Every other day. With his nose. Looking like a dodo. And more dead than ever. Morose. Less solemn. With his expression a bit empty sometimes. Then, little by little, he got back his assurance.

"What about Jeannine?" I asked him one day.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It was too beautiful."

Meanwhile Justine came back to life. With virulence. One day she said to Madame Pontus:

"I've got him back. Now I'm holding on to him."

They were married. With a dinner at which Uncle Eugène sang *Lakmé*, which finally made me understand the joke of the younger Dufiquet. And a honeymoon at Fontainebleau, where from what Justine told me when she got back, there were two bidets in every room. two. Ah, you can safely say that they often came into the picture, the two of them.

"When I think," said Justine, "the waste there is sometimes. Now at Fontainebleau . . ."



# CHAPTER 13

So he was married, Gustave. Married to Justine. His fate sealed. Fine. But he left me with his phrase. This phrase that he had said just like that, perhaps without thinking further and which ever since never stopped growing inside me, getting weightier, developing. I THOUGHT I WAS IN LOVE AND THEN I FOUND THAT. He thought he loved Justine and then he had found that it wasn't love. But how did he discover it? By thinking it over? By measuring the depth? By putting himself inside his love for Justine and looking round? No. He discovered it because he met this Blossard girl. Nothing more. Which means that, if he had not met her he would have lived to a hundred thinking that he loved Justine. In good faith. Sincere. Happy. Believing that love was like that. That happiness was like that. Saying to himself perhaps: that's all that love is, it wasn't worth making such a fuss about. But without suspecting that in fact he didn't know what love was. And all his life he would have acted, judged and taken decisions on the basis of a feeling that he had never experienced. Like a man who changes his entire mode of life on account of an illness which in fact he hasn't got. Who would follow a diet for an imaginary cancer. Doesn't that idea make you shudder? Because after all how had Gustave known this Blossard? Probably by chance. A stroke of luck. An accident which might easily not have happened. It wasn't written down in heaven that they were destined to meet each other, was it? So there must be many other similar cases. Other people who never had their stroke of luck and who never met their Blossard. Who don't even suspect that she

exists. Who are still at the Justine stage. Who intervene. Who take an interest in other people's love affairs. Because they think they know all about it, whereas they know nothing. People come to them and say: love. They reply: love. AND EACH OF THEM IS TALKING ABOUT A DIFFERENT THING. Each one is talking about a different love. Because one has got to Blossard-love and the other is still at Justine-love.

And note that if Gustave had married his Blossard, it would still have been the same thing. He loved her. Good. But what does that mean, love? It simply means that YOU THINK YOU LOVE. Gustave believed it. But he had thought so with Justine too. And yet . . . How then, once he had married his Blossard, how could he have been sure of not meeting another one? Another one who would have made him understand in his turn that the feeling that he had for his Blossard was not yet love. And then another one. And another one. Where would that end? And how would one know if you had finally got there? And what can love be then if it depends always on a new meeting, a new accident? A ladder in the dark where you never know how many rungs there are still to come. A lift in which you don't know what floor you've got to? Where is the seriousness in that? The guarantee? The certainty?

And I say: love. I might also very well say: pleasure. How are you to know? What can you base yourself on? On what other people tell you? But the others themselves, how do they know? Is there any serious description, even slightly so? Love is when you want to be with someone. Fine. But how far do you want it. How strongly? Gustave too had wanted to be with Justine. Until the day when he had discovered that this want was nothing besides the want he had for the Blossard. And the want for the Blossard in its turn . . .

Or: love is when you find pleasure in going to bed with someone. Satisfaction. All right. But what pleasure? What satisfaction? I had felt satisfaction when I went to bed with Mademoiselle Duvant. Was it really pleasure? How could I know if on the ladder of satisfaction I hadn't stopped at twenty whereas it was perhaps possible to get as far as a hundred? How could I know? And other people? The others who say to you: with my girl, old chap, it's smashing. But what does smashing mean? It's a relative term yet again. Or: love is when you're unhappy to leave someone. Unhappy? Always vague words. What unhappiness first of all? Unhappiness twenty or unhappiness a hundred? How can you measure it? Illnesses are different. There are precise symptoms. There are diagnoses. One thing is Pott's disease. Another is typhus. It's clear. You know where you are. Bubonic plague is bubonic plague. A pain in the back has a meaning. People will say to me: love can be felt. It can be felt? Gustave also felt it. For Justine. Whom he didn't love however. And a temperature? You don't need a thermometer to know if you have one. That doesn't prevent the thermometer from being remarkably useful. Because it isn't the same thing to have 99.7 or 103.8. There are different remedies, different régimes. At 99.7 you take an aspirin. At 103.8 you go to bed, you call a doctor. But what about love? Where is the thermometer of pleasure? How do you know if you've finally got to love = 100, or pleasure = 100? How can you know if you can't measure it? Because saying 'I like Blossard more than Justine' or 'I have more pleasure with Adèle than with Lucie' is no measurement. It's only a comparison. That you must check all the time. One woman after another. Negresses included. Chinese women thrown in.

Suppose all that was only a joke? Well? How do you know? If all that, happiness, feelings, pleasure, were

only things which men have all the time tried to magnify? Each one boasting, slapping his thighs, waving his arms in order to persuade other people that he experiences unheard-of sensations whereas love is perhaps never more gay than when I slept with Mademoiselle Duvant? Well! How can you know? An enormous joke in which we are all accomplices and victims at the same time? Like the fit-as-a-fiddle business. Like the man, woman and bed business. Note that I don't believe it. No, love must exist. Sex must exist. Considering the length of time people have talked about it. There is certainly something. But WE DON'T KNOW this something. Or practically not. Something about which we only have vague information, which only rests on approximate words which the others can communicate to us: sorrow, envy, pleasure. Words which only have meaning for us in the degree to which we have been able to experience the feelings that they describe, and experience them with exactly the same force as the people who mention them to us. And how can you know that? Because what does unhappiness mean? What does pleasure mean? What's enjoyment? If we've only felt little sorrows and little pleasures. And how can we know if such unhappiness was already a great unhappiness? All that is relative. Vague. And we talk. We dare to talk, discuss, insist, decide, give advice, do all that using a word which for each of us means SOMETHING ELSE. Starting from a feeling when we can never know if it has reached its highest point in us. In fact. A feeling which remains always at the mercy of another meeting. Because I said: all those who haven't met their Blossard. Fine. But nobody can ever be sure that they've their Blossard. There's always another woman whom you could try, and perhaps a greater love, a stronger pleasure, a more unexpected orgasm. Without counting homosexuality.

Without counting the fantasy, the variations and the tricks that people invent.

And that's the feeling that makes the world go round. Is it serious? Because, I who am talking to you, I've known people who turn their life upside down through love; who, THROUGH LOVE, went to live at Val d'Or rather than at Suresnes, who married, divorced, changed their jobs. And all that for what? For a feeling which they can never be sure to be what they think it is. For flu when they can never know if it's only a cold. That's the world. And doesn't it make you shudder? Really, I wonder what you want. You're made out of zinc, it isn't possible. Out of concrete.

## CHAPTER 14

In the meantime, this marriage of my sister's had completely changed my existence. First of all, I had to move house. Gustave did not appreciate family life. And the flat in the rue du Borrégo suited him. He wanted to keep it. And Justine of course agreed with him. Her Gustave, just think. I've already stated my opinion about my sister. A harpy, but at bottom a nice girl. Marriage didn't improve her. The nice girl disappeared. Only the harpy remained (my other half, said Gustave. But the worse half). My mother and I had only one enemy left. Hostile. Gone over to the other side. Always the opposite point of view. Is family nothing then? Doesn't it count? You have a daughter, a sister. A Gustave arrives. With his nose. No more daughter, no more sister. There's only a wife left, whom you disturb. And who makes it quite clear. Retreating behind the nose. Set against you. Just set.' One week at Fontainebleau and she only saw through Gustave's eyes. Gustave's comforts. Gustave's opinion. Gustave's armchair.

"Emile, you've taken Gustave's chair again."

Gustave's office.

"What, do they let you smoke at Rivet's? They wouldn't allow that at Gustave's bank."

Gustave's socks. Gustave's trousers. Gustave's behind.

Now one thing which always makes me laugh is to hear people say:

"Oh, as for me, old chap, with women, I can do what I like with them."

You see the sort. Worldly-wise types, well turned-out. Leaning on bar counters, with the air of knowing what they want. It makes me laugh, because, I assure you, however worldly-wise they are, however well turned-out, those boys, I'm sure they don't get one quarter out of their wives as a Gustave gets out of his. And when I say a Gustave, I don't speak especially of my brother-in-law. I refer to the type of man. Toby jug type, bowler hat, distinguished. Always in the same professions: accountants, agents, assistant chief clerks. Unbelievable. If Gustave had wanted his wife to poison us, her mother and her brother in fact, well, she'd have done it. And it wasn't love, observe. Love has nothing to do with it. Gustave with his snout? And Justine? I'd have given sixpence to see them in action. Gustave, being nice, KNOWING HOW TO PUT HIMSELF ON THE RIGHT LEVEL, rubbing his hands, saying:

"Well, sweetheart, must I wait till tomorrow?"

Doing his little job in two minutes and saying in conclusion:

"Good. One more thing done."

That was his signature *tuné*. Concerning everything. If he finished hammering a nail in:

"Good. One more thing done."

He put out his cigarette. He came back from the flicks:

"Good. Etcetera."

No, it wasn't love. If Gustave had been her lover Justine would have stayed on our side. But he was HER HUSBAND. Her glory.

"My husband!"

Always on the tip of her tongue.

"I'll speak to my husband about it, Madame Pontus."

But she didn't hesitate either to say sometimes:

"Oh him, the day I deceive him, he'll have deserved it all right."

The husband in fact. HER HUSBAND. Her ornament. Her occupation. She even kept the quarrels for him now. As far as we were concerned she contented herself with an ungracious word from time to time, but no more of those long arguments which pleased my poor mother so much. Then there were also their common interests, I suppose. The sense of being a married couple. The need for solidarity with someone. And the common interest was that my mother and I should get out of the way. So my mother went to live with her sister near Meaux. I rented a room in the rue Montorgueil. Gustave let me take away some pieces of furniture. Not without emphasising their value.

"This wardrobe might still be useful to us." He opened it, then closed it again. "Oh, I shan't argue with you about a wardrobe. You take it, Emile."

And that evening, at table, he said :

"Fitted out like a king, Emile! A first-class wardrobe!"

And he came to help me with the wall-paper. For the fun of it. He liked wall-papering.

It wasn't by chance that I chose the rue Montorgueil. On the first floor lived Rose and her husband. The Rose story : at Rivet's, I'd made a friend, Lucien Masson, a little dried-up type, always talking about women. One day he said :

• "And how's your baby doll?"

"I haven't got anybody," I replied.

"Nobody? That's no life."

I was living. So it was a life. But people have these ways of expressing themselves. Then Lucien spoke no more about it. He even put me off. Or perhaps I just imagined it. One day he came back to me :

"Listen," he said. "It can't go on like this. A guy without his doll, I must tell you, it makes me sick to see it."



Altruism, indeed.

"I've got someone for you. What do you say to that?"

"You're too kind."

At six o'clock we left.

"Shall we go?"

"Certainly."

We took the underground.

"Listen," Lucien said to me, "I must tell you, she's not a tart, you know. You've got to be nice to her. Don't go putting your hand under her skirts straightaway. Go quietly. Infiltrate at the corners, that's the way. But what a woman! I must tell you old man, I've been trying to get her for two years, and there's nothing doing. I'm not her type. I can tell you, she's very choosy."

That made my mouth water. We came to a café in the rue Réaumur.

"Hullo, Rose. May we? I'm with a friend. Magis, he's called Emile."

We sat down. She was a fine figure of a woman, of a certain age (one more phrase that doesn't mean anything—as though every age wasn't certain), no longer very young, on the large side, with a big head, black hair well arranged, one gold tooth, full cheeks, and she made you think of a thick piece of bread with plenty of butter on it. And she already had three glasses in front of her. She didn't say anything. She had a funny way of looking at people. Lucien made a few jokes in a pleasant sort of way, but they didn't ring true.

"Well, my turtle doves," he said at last, "you must excuse me. I've got a call to make in the district. I'll be back straightaway."

"Don't get lost," she said.

But not very nicely. Then she said nothing more at all. The café was full. There was plenty of noise, and the ringing of the till. I began to make an effort.

"Do you like this hot weather?"

It was July.

"Me?" she said. "I couldn't care less."

All right.

"That red jumper suits you."

She almost gave me half a smile. Women! I ventured something else:

"We might go to the flicks."

"What for?"

My God!

"Do you live round here?"

Time went by.

"What's happened to Lucien?" she said finally, stubbing out her cigarette.

I was fed up.

"I wonder what he's up to."

"I wonder what he's up to," she repeated, imitating me. "you're a fine pair of bastards."

"Why?"

I hope that showed sang-froid on my part.

"So he wants to drop me, does he?"

"Who?"

"And he found you to put in his place."

All that very calmly, without getting upset, looking in front of her. She had a calm voice which hung down like the heavy fold of a curtain.

"He could have done better."

I didn't really understand.

"But still . . ."

She sighed. Then:

"Waiter," she said.

The waiter arrived. I was struck dumb.

"Well?" she said. "Perhaps you think I'm going to pay, do you?"

I paid quickly. I left a good tip. She got up. I wondered . . .

"Well," she said, "are you stuck to your chair?"

I?

"That'll be fun."

That's all.

It was soon afterwards that my sister got married and everything else happened. I told Rose about it.

"There's a room in my house," she said. "On the third floor. You could take it."

"But . . ."

"It'd be convenient. It'd suit me."

Fine. Besides, in one way, it was economical for me. Until then it had had to be the hotel. Twenty-five francs a time. Or even thirty. And the tip. I used to say to myself: "Emile, you sleep above your station."

## CHAPTER 15

I still haven't written quickly enough. Events have caught up with me. Besides, I don't want to write too fast. I want to set down my terms. Understand what I'm writing. But I'd hoped to finish it before the trial. This trial which in fact . . . And now the trial is here. It's true that my lawyer had said that it couldn't possibly come on before April. Then it was put forward. I don't know why. The papers began to talk about it again. I received my summons. And leave from the office for the same reason. Monsieur Marchandean, the director, said a few kind words to me.

"Courage, my dear Magis, courage. It's a painful ordeal, but I know you'll bear it with dignity."

"I hope so, Monsieur Marchandean."

"Let us hope that this time justice will show itself severe."

"Let us hope so, Monsieur Marchandean."

In short, I appeared. As a witness. The most important witness, as the papers emphasised. I think I explained the business well. I've cut it out from *Paris-Soir*. It's a little touched up, of course. The résumé. *Cutting from Paris-Soir*.

After the magistrate came Emile Magis, the husband of the victim, the only direct witness of the tragedy. He is a man of middle height, thin, with receding hair. Modestly dressed, he is a typical minor civil servant, always on time, conscientious, visibly overwhelmed by the tragedy in which fate, which strikes so blindly, has entangled him. After a few words of comfort, Monsieur Souchet, the judge, invited him to make a statement.

MAGIS. I was married five years ago and had always lived in perfect harmony with my wife. She was a model partner and I venture to say that from this point of view I have always shown myself worthy of her.

THE ACCUSED. Liar!

THE JUDGE. Silence! You will speak in your turn.

MAGIS. Our happiness was unclouded. It lasted until the day when Dugommier began to hang around my wife.

THE JUDGE. Was the accused a childhood friend of your wife?

MAGIS. Yes. His family and that of my wife used to see each other. Then he left for Indo-China. When he came back he went to see my parents-in-law. They didn't think they were doing any harm in giving him my wife's address. He came to see her.

THE JUDGE. So the initiative about seeing her again came from him?

MAGIS. Yes.

THE JUDGE. Did this haste not seem suspect to you?

MAGIS. I'm an honest man, sir, and I'm often weak enough to believe in the honesty of others. In any case I wouldn't have wanted to object to a childhood friendship. After some time I saw that Dugommier was in love with my wife, but I had confidence in her. And I even venture to say that I had confidence in him. He had known how to win me over with his admissions of friendship. This confidence was not rewarded. My work at the Ministry forced me to be away from home during regular hours. Dugommier profited from this to pay more and more visits to my wife. Our happy home . . .

THE ACCUSED. You were deceiving her . . .

THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR. We are concerned with you, Dugommier, and not with Magis. I must however emphasise that there is nothing to indicate that the witness has ever deceived his wife.

MAGIS. It was impossible not to notice that my wife was nervy and worried. One day, as I had toothache, I left the Ministry during the afternoon and I came home. I surprised them in my own bedroom, in my own bed, two yards away from my little daughter who was asleep in the next room.

THE JUDGE. So then, what did you do?

MAGIS. Succeeding in overcoming my anger, I contented myself with throwing the wretched man out of the house.

THE ACCUSED. Wretch yourself. What about the wallet?

THE JUDGE. For the last time, Dugommier! I ask you to wait for the end of the evidence.

MAGIS. As for my wife, she showed so much regret, so much remorse over her fault that I decided to forgive her. She swore to me that she would never see her seducer again. A few weeks later however she confessed to me that Dugommier had come again to make advances to her. I went to see him to make him agree to stop badgering her. He made the most solemn promises to me about this.

The accused broke in again insolently, but the Judge put him in his place again severely.

MAGIS. Some time later, one evening, my wife, in tears, told me that Dugommier had again come to the house, that he had begged her to resume their liaison again, and that when she refused he threatened her violently.

MAITRE LOGEAIN (for the defence). Why was she in tears?

MAGIS. I suppose that she was frightened of giving way again. She knew Dugommier's violent temperament. I suggested to her then that she should write herself to Dugommier to confirm her definite wish never to see him again.

THE ACCUSED. You forced her to write that letter!

THE JUDGE. Good heavens, it was natural enough!

MAGIS. I didn't have to force her. My wife had only hate and disgust left for Dugommier. She showed me the rough draft of this letter, which I've kept. Two days later she showed me also Dugommier's reply. In this letter Dugommier promised to make no more efforts to see her.

THE ACCUSED. It was a pretence.

THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR. This rough draft and this reply form part of the depositions and provide, Gentlemen of the Jury, a sufficiently eloquent piece of evidence.

MAGIS. The following day, when I came home about three o'clock . . .

MAITRE LOGEAIN. How did it happen that on that day you came home at three o'clock?

MAGIS. I was on sick leave.

MAITRE LOGEAIN. And yet you were well enough to go out? (Murmur in court.)

MAGIS. I said that I was on sick leave. I didn't say that I was sick. (Laughter.) Knowing Dugommier's character and being afraid that he would come, my wife had begged me not to leave her.

MAITRE LOGEAIN. But you went out all the same? The court showed its disapproval.

THE JUDGE. Now look, Maître Logeain. I wish to God that all cases of sick leave had always such a legitimate motive as this one . . .

MAGIS. I had gone out to do some shopping.

MAITRE CORDIER (counsel for the plaintiff). And on his way back he stopped at a café for a few moments. Nothing more natural than that.

MAITRE LOGEAIN. And did you drink much in the café?

MAGIS. Only a coffee.

**Applause from the court.**

**THE JUDGE.** Silence! Go on, Monsieur Magis.

**MAGIS.** So I came back. From the landing I could hear loud voices.

**THE ACCUSED.** It isn't true! We were talking normally.

**THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR.** Then how could the witness have heard you from the landing?

**MAGIS.** Dugommier was shouting so loudly that I recognised his voice immediately. I listened.

**MAITRE LOGEAIN.** Still on the landing?

**MAGIS.** No, I had gone into the dining room, which is adjacent to the room where they were. So I listened.

**MAITRE LOGEAIN.** Why?

**MAGIS.** I wanted to know how my wife would reply. But it was Dugommier who spoke all the time. He alternated between threats and pleading, but always at the top of his voice, like a man who was very upset. He alternately begged my wife to carry on their liaison and threatened to kill himself or her.

**THE ACCUSED.** But it's a lie!

**MAGIS.** All at once I heard this sentence: "All right! I'll kill you." My wife screamed. Then I opened the door. Dugommier had his revolver in his hand. He turned towards me and shouted: "I'll kill the two of you." I rushed at him but he had already fired and my wife collapsed on the floor.

Magis stopped for a moment and put his hand over his eyes. Then he collected himself and went on:

We stayed there a moment, very close to each other, without moving. Then Dugommier drew back. He looked like a madman. He lifted the weapon towards me. I ran away. I went downstairs.



The rest is not interesting. The verdict was given yesterday evening. Dugommier was condemned to twenty years' hard labour. He made an awful scene again.

## CHAPTER 16

Fine. With this interlude over I take up my story again. Not without relief, I must admit. You never know how these trials are going to turn out. Even when you have on your side—as I had—the approval of your conscience and above all that of the public (so comforting and so helpful in falsifying judgments). I sometimes read accounts of it in the papers. Every time it's like a saucepan that someone knocks over and water splashes everywhere, running this way and that way, right and left, without anyone knowing why. Over a detail. A question asked accidentally. A shade of meaning.

‘And did you drink a lot in this café?’

It so happened that I hadn't drunk anything. So his question got him nowhere, that half-wit of a lawyer. But if I'd drunk three Pernods, everyone would have gone on making speeches until the following day. With conclusions, suppositions, hypotheses. You'll say: detail, bagatelle, trifle, flea-bite; drunk or not drunk, it would have made no difference in the end. But who knows? It would still have messed things up, messed up this portrait that I held out in front of me. Because my strength in this affair was that for once I had the system on my side. Logic. Probability. To such a degree that nobody thought of looking further. It's even comic to think about it. I, who have suffered from the system all my life, now for once, the system protected me. I felt its drapery around me, its shadows. Better: its brightness. Blinding. And which blinded other people, in fact. That's the system: so bright that it blinds people, so dazzling that you can't see anything any longer. And I nicely sheltered behind my story, which

was as smooth as a mirror. The evidence. The most natural reactions.

‘Now, counsel, don’t insist. It was perfectly natural that Magis . . .’

Perfectly natural? Simply forgetting to wonder if I was natural.

‘Everybody would have behaved in the same way.’

Everybody? That must be checked. And why not: everyone EXCEPT Magis? But they were a thousand miles away from that. I held out my story to them. As clear as daylight. Whys and wherefores nicely dovetailed into each other, like brilliant and fast-moving pistons, so fast moving that you haven’t time to see them properly. And truth hidden behind. REALITY hidden behind. Not showing itself. Truth hidden behind probability. Reality behind the probable. Behind what was very natural. That’s what always amuses me in detective stories.

‘We know, gentlemen, that the victim was in the habit of putting his shaving brush down on the right of his razor. Now observe, the shaving brush is ON THE LEFT. Why?’

Why? And can’t one ever be absent-minded, half-wit? Does caprice not exist? Nor fantasy? The telephone might ring and lead you to put down your shaving brush anywhere, in a hurry.

‘MacCarthy only likes blondes. Now, on the night of the crime he was seen with a red-head.’

And what about love at first sight, blockhead? Disgust? All those things which mean that sometimes you deny, forget or renounce the habits of twenty years.

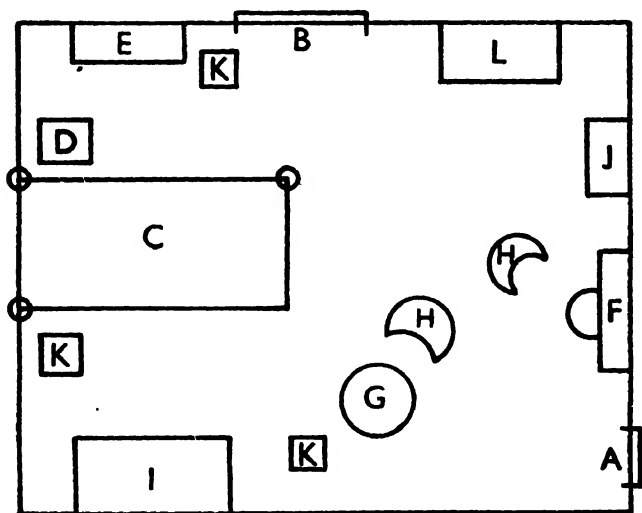
Why?

AS THOUGH THERE WERE ANY REASONS. No reason. Nine times out of ten you act without reasons. Why? There is no why. But yes. Look into your life. Look for the whys. Do you find many of them? Listen, I who

am talking to you, for the three years that I lived in the rue Montorgueil . . .

PLAN OF MY BEDROOM IN THE RUE MONTORGUEIL

- A: door
- B: window with mauve curtains (sic)
- C: bed (the bed I had when I was young—three brass knobs—the fourth was missing)
- D: night table
- E: washbasin (drawers underneath)
- F: fireplace and stove
- G: table
- H: two armchairs (one yellow and one garden chair)
- I: wardrobe with mirror (first at E, then moved because Rose liked to be able to see herself in bed)
- J: gas stove
- K: three chairs
- L: small wardrobe and larder



Well, I can say that during the three years that I spent in this room I didn't perform one act for which there was a reason. NOT ONE. Or else insignificant reasons for little immediate actions. I had a headache, I went into a chemist's, I asked for an aspirin—I don't call that a reason. No, I repeat it: without reason. I lived without reason. Even my move. Yet there is an action which was important for me, which changed my life and my habits. Well, everything considered, I moved in without any reason. Without any reason for me. Without a real decision on my part. I wrote: in one sense it was economical for me. Exactly. But that was only a consequence, not a reason. Besides, a man's reason is not generally any more than that: tricks they find afterwards to persuade themselves that they haven't been silly. Because I hadn't thought of economy before that. Or rather . . . Oh, it's so difficult to explain. Words always go too far. Most of all when you only want to speak the truth, when you don't want to accept an approximation. I said: without reason. Good. I didn't say without reflection. Nuance. Because I reflect a lot. And I even like to reflect. I like to go round and round in my daze. So I certainly said to myself sometimes, Rose is very nice, she's got easily the best curves in the district, it's worth while putting yourself out for them in any case, but the hotel each time, twenty-five francs, the tip, the drink that we had in the café where we met, two or three times a week, that easily comes to four or five hundred francs a month, it's too much. God, I said to myself. But the reflections you make, that's one thing. Reasons are another. A mirror also reflects. But it doesn't take any action. It reflects a table: that table doesn't become a reason because of that. You can pull all the faces you want at it, they still won't make the mirror walk away or even crack in two. It needs something else before it will break. A knock. A shock.

From the outside. From this point of view, I am a mirror. I reflect. Nothing more. I said to myself: that's too much. But I didn't move out. Before I moved out there had to be Gustave. Before I went to the rue Montorgueil there had to be Rose. If I'd been all alone I'd never have got there. Because for reflections to become reasons it needs a shock, and this shock, with me, has to come from someone else. I can't manage to give it to myself on my own. I don't know if I make myself understood.

People will tell me that I'm behaving like a fusspot, a dentist, a meticulous type; that I'm walking a tight-rope; that Rose and Gustave were my reasons. In one sense. But reasons outside myself. But reasons outside me. Reasons which came from them, not from me. And then what were the reasons? I went to bed with Rose. Fine. Do you call that a reason? And why did I go to bed with her? Because Lucien had pushed me into it. And why was it Lucien? Because he worked with me at Rivet's wallpapers. But why did I work at Rivet's wallpapers and not at Rivet's household department in the rue de Turbigo? Because Gustave had recommended me, because he wanted to marry my sister (the mutt) and he wanted to marry my sister because one day, in the tube, she had caught her jacket in the door and he had helped her get it out. Which means that at the fountainhead, the source of every orgasm I had with Rose what did I find? An underground railway official in rather too much of a hurry who had pressed his automatic button a bit too soon. And who was in rather a hurry because. And you would say that that could be called a reason? A choice? A choice that starts with the door of a tube train? Thanks very much, you can keep it.

Without counting all the other would-be connections that I should have been able to sort out on the way: why did Lucien know Rose and why did he work at Rivet's and

why was Gustave in that train and why did his parents leave Chalon-sur-Saône? Are those reasons? This muddle which goes on in a watered down way for ever and ever? No, not a bit of it. Coincidences at the most. Chance. Things which happen like that. Do you want the key to existence? Here it is: things happen or they don't happen. All the rest is a joke. A banana skin. No interest. And you slip on it.

## CHAPTER 17

Why did I sleep with Rose? No reason at all, I repeat. Things happened like that, that's all. Rose existed, that's what counted. In one sense she existed even more for other people, I never managed to understand why. She was there. She said:

"Eight o'clock! I must be off. We'll meet on Thursday at half past six."

It wasn't a question. She simply made statements. She stated that on Thursday at half past six we'd be together again. A sort of fatality, that's what she carried around with her, that woman.

"Thursday at half past six."

I said: all right. And I stopped existing. I melted, I dissolved. I became nothing. A breath of air. A breath of air which went to Rivet's, sat down at a table, lit a cigarette, blew out a little smoke. Until Thursday, when, at six o'clock, someone would begin to exist again. Who? Magis? Emile? Not a bit of it. It was Rose's lover who would begin to exist again. Someone who only existed because somewhere, someone else was waiting for him. Are you going to say that I might not have gone? I didn't think of it. That even gave me pleasure. Not because of Rose, I didn't care a damn about Rose. But because it gave me something to exist for. And thanks to Rose I existed. Thanks to this weight and this will that I could feel, from a certain moment, weighing down upon me, substituting themselves for me. I was diluted. Then, at six o'clock, I began to collect myself together again, my arms, legs, thighs, everything that she was waiting for. All the things to which she gave existence. Because it's other



people who make you exist, that's another of my discoveries.

But is there a reason in all that? Not a shadow. Love? However hard I try I cannot manage to associate the word Rose and the word love. The big word Rose and the little word love. Because for me the word Rose is enormous. All her body, her breasts, her legs. I put them on top of love. Love disappears. Oh, I've thought about love, though. I often used to say to myself: Rose? I asked myself questions. I weighed the pros and cons, breasts and buttocks all finished in the same way by falling down on top of me, the pro with the con, the left and right breast, the occidental and oriental buttock. By crushing my miserable little reflections. I came home. Why shouldn't I have come home? Rose came up. Why shouldn't she have come up? People always say: why this, why that? But there's also the why NOT this, why NOT that? No answer to the first, none to the second, that balances out. No reason for, no reason against. Life presses: you give way. Life pushes: you go forward. Into something soft. Into the less than soft: into nothingness. Why sleep with Rose? Why not sleep with her? She took off her dress. I had to. A man, a woman, there's a sort of weightiness that pulls them towards each other, a sort of solitude around them that tracks them down, that pushes them together in a corner. You're impelled as though by the weight of your own nose. And you must f . . . , mustn't you? If not, why would Rose have come? To play housey-housey? Can you see me suggesting that we played housey-housey? To talk? What about? Besides, Rose didn't appreciate my conversation. Sometimes I ventured a remark. She didn't even reply. I insisted.

“Don't you think so?”

“What?”

"What I was saying."

"Can you look at my back? I think there's a spot on it."

Or in the evening, when I went down to have dinner with her, with her husband. He would say :

"Well, Magis, what does that mean . . . Carnot?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

And Rose would say :

"Oh, Magis, as for conversation . . ."

Or if I said something at greater length :

"No, listen to him. I suppose it's better to hear that than to be deaf."

And she sighed. Took off her dress and her petticoat. Then there was the thing about her breasts. Every time. Ritual. It must be said I've never known anyone carry indifference to such lengths as that woman. In everything. I would say :

"Have you seen the news? In the paper."

"I couldn't care less," she would say.

Or I would say :

"It's getting colder."

She looked at me with a vague air of astonishment :

"Where?"

I'm not making any of it up.

"How's Eugène and his rheumatism?"

She didn't even answer. I tried to be coy with her.

"Do you like your little Emile?"

"Are you interested?"

Ah, she had character! She even managed, by her presence alone, to get rid of everything else. She came into my room. At once, there was nothing left but her, like a complete world, she was like an egg too, with her breasts at one end, her hips at the other. Because she did find those interesting. That was her weakness. She never took

off her dress without looking at herself in the wardrobe mirror.

"No," she would say.

As though lost in admiration of herself.

"Just look at that. That bosom."

"Mm," I said.

Out of politeness. Because at bottom I didn't care a damn about it. Indifference grows on you. Since I'd known Rose there were lots of things which didn't interest me any more. Rose, for example.

"Breasts like that."

She sighed over them. And there was no joking about it. I once said to her: "I've heard a hell of a lot about your tits."

"There are some things you ought to respect."

The next minute it was her behind.

"I know women who'd give ten years of their life to have a behind like that."

"I can believe it."

The pros and cons, the two breasts, the two buttocks, it all weighed down on top of me like big chunks of lard, like a hump on my back. Should I let them drop? Why? So that I could get myself rigged out with another pair of breasts? What was the point of that? Not so big, perhaps? Not so heavy? But the weight of a pair of breasts is a *moral* point. You don't weigh them by the pound.

But is there a reason in all that? Not a bit of it. No reason at all. Neither with Rose nor with me. It happened like that.

Life was a slope. A stream. A slow stream, but enough to carry you away. And should you take the trouble to swim? Once you've got a job . . . Some little post, a little salary. That you can live on and keep yourself busy with. The rest comes of its own accord. Days follow days. The hours pass. The night comes to an end.

The morning is grey, the odour of a wet towel. The tube, people following each other, in the corridors. Rivet's. The office.

"Magis, today you must . . ."

All right. Or Monsieur Lochon:

"Magis, will you go and see to the packing for the consignment to Lyons?"

Baudon taking his pills. For the liver. Lucien who'd got another girl and was telling the story. At midday we got our slices of bread, with cheese or cold omelette. Everyone had his little packet. A strong musty smell filled the offices. The concierge arrived with her blue coffee pot.

"Well, Madame Dognon, how's your son? Has he brought you back a body yet? That would be nice. You could put it on the mantelpiece."

Because her son worked with a firm of undertakers. In the accounts department in fact.

"Have a cigarette?"

All pals together.

"Curse you, Masson, you've put salami on my ledger again."

Or:

"Baudon and his pills."

A goodish length of time to pass while the boss and Lochon were out at lunch. We put our feet on the desks and talked about life. Opposite, at Bossu's, the typists. were taking the air at the windows. Masson made signs to them.

"Well, gentlemen."

It was Lochon coming back and hanging up his hat.

"Well, gentlemen, where do you think you are?"

"At the brothel," said Lucien.

"Ah, that would certainly be more pleasant," replied Luchon.

Just a manner of speaking, needless to say, for it was enough to see the look he bestowed on his desk, rubbing his hands down his lapels, to realise that he, Lochon, definitely preferred his office. But he understood the joke.

"Those dames in the waiting-room," cried Lucien, encouraged.

"Masson."

Lochon tapped on the edge of his desk. That was enough. Joke over.

"To work, gentlemen. Magis, don't forget the despatch to Lyons."

The afternoon slid underneath us, like a cushion, soft and somnolent, our fingers smelling of bread and tobacco, our hands covered with dust. At six o'clock we left. At six o'clock, my room and Rose. I said:

"Do you know, in the tube there was a little Chinese priest."

Rose's breasts heaved nonchalantly.

"Ah," I said, "to find two more like those . . ."

"You're telling me," she said.

With pride. With gentleness: Touched by the compliment. Then we went to bed. There were some days too when she didn't come, because she had things to do. Then I read the paper. Or I tidied up. If not, towards half-past seven Rose left and a quarter of an hour later I came down in my turn. In my slippers. I talked to Eugène, while Rose, in a remote, dreamy sort of way got the dinner ready.

At first, I'd been careful with Eugène. Her husband, damn it. Because of the system, as always. I tried to hide the fact that his wife came up to my room nearly every day. I would come in saying:

"Well, Rose, how are you since yesterday?"

She didn't answer. And Eugène looked at me grinning, firmly seated on his chair, with his coat off, with his waistcoat unbuttoned, his fingers drumming on the

table. Eugène was a fine figure of a man, plump, with a big round nose. I couldn't understand how Rose could prefer me to him. But perhaps she didn't prefer me, perhaps she just added me on. Or who knows?

"Damn you, Magis!"

"What's so funny?"

"Just the way you go on."

I didn't know what to make of it any longer. I spoke to Rose about it.

"But does Eugène know?"

"Know what?"

"Well, that you come upstairs."

"Don't bother about Eugène."

There's one more thing that I must say about Rose, which is that I never heard the woman say anything mean. NEVER. I've said that she didn't care a damn about anything. Yes, in the sense that she ignored everything. Not in the sense that she made things seem less important. Indifferent, yes, but not in a mocking sort of way. Not sarcastic. Or else, I would say, a sort of calm or benevolent type of mockery. And not very often at that. I must say it: that woman taught me RESPECT. She had respect. Eugène for example. She deceived him, fine. In a manner of speaking that is, because he knew. She deceived him, but she never said anything to me that might have made him angry, or given me any idea that he might be ridiculous. Because she respected herself. It's a funny thing to say, but you could feel that she thought of herself with respect. And even me. I didn't exist much for her, it's true. But as far as I did exist, she respected me. One thing, for example. Sometimes it happens to me—as it does to everyone, I suppose—that I have off moments. Days when I'm not very good. From the bed point of view. Well, when it happened to me with the Duvant (and the thing didn't really interest her very much) she couldn't

stop herself from passing comments. 'That's funny,' she would say, 'you ought to talk to the doctor about it.' That made me cross in fact. My wife: the same thing. Each time, she laughed. Humiliating. With Rose it was as though she hadn't noticed. So I wasn't on the attack? All right, I wasn't on the attack. She talked about something else. She didn't care a damn about anything. But there's more than one way of not caring a damn. She didn't care, but not in an envious way. And little by little I managed not to care a damn either. And I realise it now, that's what was so marvellous. The reason why? No reason why. Nothingness. Existing. But existing just as much as necessary. And she radiated that feeling all round her. Rose did, just like a mist. One evening—Rose was not coming to see me that evening—one evening when I came back I saw Eugène's sister on Rose's landing, a tall gawky thing who often came to see them.

"It's a nuisance," she said. "There's no one there."

"Wait a bit, then. They'll soon be back."

"It's a nuisance."

"Come up to my room then. You can sit down."

A tall woman, with long flat cheeks, like goloshes, and a moleskin jacket. Not bad but bony. Well, why did we go to bed? For nothing. Precisely for nothing. Did she want to? Not a bit of it. Nor I. I couldn't care less about this woman. And she certainly couldn't care less about me. But precisely what reason, since we didn't care a damn, could we have found for not going to bed? There was a quarter of an hour to be passed. We didn't know what to do. We were there in the room like two wisps of smoke. My hand on her knee: smoke. Hers on my chest: smoke.

"Perhaps if I took my jacket off . . ."

The walls around us pushed us towards each other. And boredom. Greyness. The daylight that was fading

away. You have the impression that you're going to dissolve along with it. So, to stop yourself from fading away completely, you risk making a gesture. Because there are moments when, if you don't make a move, you'll perhaps stop living. So my hand was on her knee. And then, my hand had to be somewhere, hadn't it? It weighed something. I had to put it down. Then, at a certain moment, you want something. You notice that you've stopped being bored. Then you go to bed. A cloud. Smoke on top of more smoke. She was already getting up, straightening her skirt with little touches.

"Eugène must be back now."

"Probably."

She put her jacket on again.

"Monsieur Magis, you're unreasonable."

That was the system coming back. With the jacket. Ways of saying things. Habits. Unreasonable? Why? She would have been properly embarrassed to say so. Why was it more unreasonable than if we had both read newspapers or if I'd asked her to sew me on a button? She left. I saw her again from time to time, at Rose's.

"Hullo, Monsieur Magis," she would say.

As though nothing had happened. BECAUSE NOTHING DID HAPPEN. Nothing, save that once more I had touched the depths of indifference. But I was silly at that stage. I didn't realise the happiness it gave me.



# CHAPTER 18

Careful. I mustn't let myself get carried away by my story. I mustn't go in for the picturesque. The further I go the more I realise that these years in the rue Montorgueil had a considerable importance for me. But why? Well, it was BECAUSE I WAS AT LAST LIVING ON MY RIGHT LEVEL. On my level, I don't know if I make myself understood but I can't find any other term. Exactly on my level. And it was that which allowed me to see the system, the bluff and the lie. Note that there were also outside events. The woman in my bed, the Barbedart incident and the illumination that followed it (see Chapter One). But it was above all that I was living on my level and once you've found your level then you discover the system. Until now I spoke of it as something which is IN FRONT OF US. No, the system is not in front of us, it is ABOVE us. Or perhaps for some people, below. But in any case, not on our level. Better still: the system is precisely the thing which stops us from keeping to our real level. Like a trellis, I would say.

You do something. O.K. You go to bed or you don't, you go out or you come back, you fly or you don't fly. O.K. THEN, you look for a reason, a motive or an incitement. Why? Because you need it? Not at all. You can live perfectly without any reasons. Only in order to do that you must begin by ACCEPTING life without reasons. That's what is difficult. The system weighs down on us. The system poisons us. Then, once the act is committed you look for reasons. So that you can fasten it to the trellis. To attach yourself to the trellis. The need for reassuring yourself. The fear of being different from other people. The fear of going right to the bottom of yourself.

So a reason, quickly, like the handle of an umbrella, hooked on to the trellis. Because, as long as there is a reason, it's impossible to go down to the bottom of yourself. The trouble is that truth is to be found precisely at the bottom of your own mind. At the end of your being. And you don't go there. Because of the reasons. Because of the incitement. Because of everything that settles on top of the acts to conceal their meaning. Like a platform. Have you ever been up on a platform? Yes? Well, you know then that on a platform everything that you do, it isn't actually a lie, if you like, but it isn't exactly the truth any more. You put on airs, you act the hero, you preen yourself, you play the innocent, you laugh without knowing what you're laughing at. Nervously. Or you play the fool. Even without realising it. But during this time, there are the people who really live, who only laugh when they want to, who keep a natural expression on their faces: where are they? At the foot of the platform. Or better still: underneath the platform. Because those who are at the foot of the platform are still distracted by something. When you're underneath the platform there's nothing to distract you any more. You're in the darkness, the scramble, the truth. The reasons are the platform. The excuses: the platform. You do this or that and then you falsify your action through wanting to stick a reason into it, an incitement. Or you even act without being really pushed to do it, basing yourself on reasons that you haven't checked, as though you were on the platform, I repeat it, a yard above yourself. Whereas truth is at the bottom of yourself, below the platform. Truth and therefore happiness. Yes. I realised it later, the happiness of the rue Montorgueil, the marvellous thing about it was that. And I only understood it too late. AND YET I had examples in front of my eyes. Rose and Eugène. Who lived underneath the platform. And I lived close to them. And I lived

underneath too. But I didn't realise it. You're silly when you're young, everyone knows that. And then the system is treacherous. The trellis is crafty. It catches up with you for no reason at all. You let yourself exist a little further than others and already there's a step which slides underneath your feet. You go on, you raise yourself one inch higher than other people and the trellis gets hold of you by the hair.

As for me, what ruined me, although you wouldn't believe it, was whist. Precisely. Because I played a bit better than other people. Isn't it stupid. I was a louse. Happy as a louse. Then I allowed myself to put this feather in my cap. And a louse with feathers in its cap, just think of that, and your happiness is over.

It was Eugène's fault too. Oh, without knowing it. He loved cards, that man. Every evening he went to play his game at the *Escargot*, a café in the rue Greneta, with the regulars. In the end he took me with him. Note that until then cards had meant nothing to me. But once in the café with Eugène, I wanted to. I didn't want to cut too bad a figure at it. I concentrated. Also, I think I have the sort of intelligence that's needed. I'm precise. I don't get excited. I've a good memory. To cut a long story short, after a little time I became an excellent player. And by that method, something of a personality at the *Escargot*. They waited for me before beginning the game. People from other tables asked my advice.

"Magis, look at this hand. Is it *misère* or what the hell?"

Sagaciously, with one finger, I pointed to the king of diamonds.

"But you have it four times."

"There's a risk."

"Well, gentlemen, since Magis forbids me *misère*, I pass."

If one evening I didn't come, it was pointed out to me the next day. And one day I heard the owner's wife saying:

"Ah, Monsieur Magis, he's really someone."

I didn't see the danger. Because I didn't yet know that it's from the moment that you're somebody that the system begins to track you down. From the moment your head sticks out above the others. Like being in the train. You play the fool, you stick your face out through the window, then bonk, a telegraph post knocks your block off. If I'd played any old how, well, I'd still be at the *Escargot*, in my scramble, in the heap, with the smoke round the electric lights, the mirrors, the sound of billiards being played in the background, the little waitress whose bottom we used to pinch. Happiness, in other words. Instead of which . . .

I was admired, that was my misfortune. You'll say to me: admired because he's good at whist, that's a fine thing. BUT THEY DID ADMIRE ME. Whether you're admired for one thing or another, it's still admiration—and admiration makes you go on living, justifying yourself. And once you manage to exist, you don't know where it'll stop. Isn't that what happened to Napoleon? Someone else I knew, a certain Lossart. He was admired for his tool, for its dimensions. It wasn't anything very special either. But his friends talked about it. They complimented him on it. In the end it went to his head and one day the police had to come urgently to pick him up in a big brasserie on the boulevards where he was walking round from table to table with his tool on a plate, with a line of cross-talk. That's something.

I know, I've also written that at a certain time the envy of the other soldiers in my regiment had done me good. Exactly. Because at that moment I needed to be reassured. In the rue Montorgeuil I didn't need it any more. And then it was a question of degree. A little

admiration, I don't say. But when that takes on proportions . . . People look at you. You begin to live in them and not in yourself, I don't know if I make myself understood. You live by the breath of others, in a way. As though someone stuck a tube into you somewhere and people blew into it. You swell bigger and bigger. BUT ARE YOU STILL YOURSELF?

Besides, yes or no, I'm wearing myself out explaining, but, yes or no, is it because of my talent for whist that I came into contact with Monsieur Masure, and yes or no, is this Masure man the father of my poor wife whose tragic end was described earlier? Yes or no? Well?

Monsieur Masure too was admired at the *Escargot*. I because of whist. He because of his position. He was an assistant chief clerk at the Ministry of Public Health. So people listened to him. They asked his opinion on things to do with the government.

"Well, Monsieur Masure, what do they think of Mussolini in the civil service?"

He was someone in fact. Like me. The two ornaments of the café. The two leading lights. And in a way this admiration brought us together. If I had played any old way Masure would never have looked at me. He wasn't proud, it wasn't that. He was more of a jovial type, with his pipe which he knocked out on the heel of his shoe. But in the end when he was there with us you could see that only two or three of the people really interested him: the butcher because he was his butcher, Dubreuil because he smoked cigars and me because of whist. He would come in. He would say:

"Good evening, gentlemen!"

To everyone, in a circle, like one lump. Then:

"Monsieur Dubreuil! Magis, old chap!"

Shade of meaning.

Then one day he took me on one side.

"Magis, old man . . ."

"Monsieur Masure."

"I have my uncle from Montauban staying with me. The tax-collector. He likes cards but he doesn't like coming here to the café to play. He's a spoilt old man. He doesn't like to put himself out."

I was wearing my dumb look, as usual. Particularly since the others were looking at us.

"Come tomorrow evening then to have a game with him. He plays well too."

I said all right.

The next day I told Rose about it.

"With the Masures? You're very grand."

They were known in the district. Madame Masure who always had a hat on.

"You haven't got any buttons missing, have you?"

So I arrived at the Masures' place. You found yourself walking on women there. Madame Masure . . .

"Delighted to meet you."

Then a daughter, fairly plain. Then another one. Then the aunt. I was saying to myself, it's a joke, it isn't possible. Then another one appeared.

"My youngest, Magis. Charlotte."

"Pleased to meet you."

It was over, I hoped. A minute later:

"My eldest, Hortense."

"There aren't any more, are there?"

"Four daughters, Magis. What do you say to that?"

I said nothing.

The uncle from Montauban was a treacherous type. He was a tall man with loose arms and cheeks like rags. Black under the eyes. And did he play badly! It was unbelievable. Hesitating for a quarter of an hour at a time.

"Shall I play this one or that one?"

He seemed to ask me. He took his card out. Then he put it back. His tongue bulging his cheek. Worried.

"If I play that and he's got the knave of hearts . . . Have you got the knave of hearts, Monsieur Magis?"

"Maybe," I answered carefully.

That made him cross, the old jaguar.

"What a reply. But you CAN'T have it."

And then I did have it.

"Good heavens! But you COULDN'T have it."

I apologised. With a wave of the hand.

"Normally . . ."

Normally? Is there a system for cards too?

"That's not fair play, Magis, I'll take back my card."

And he did! Ah, they've got a peculiar way of playing cards at Montauban.

"But . . ."

"You're not going to teach me the rules of whist."

In a menacing tone, he would say:

"During the thirty-two years that I've been in the service."

Where was the connection?

"Normally . . ."

In the end it was I who was wrong. I said all right. In the end he won, the old ant-eater. That cheered him up.

"Well, all in all that was a good game. Are you coming again tomorrow, Magis?"

And I went back the next day. Then the following Thursday. Then Saturday. The little flat. The drawing room buried in the darkness. A lamp on the card table. Another for the girls who were reading or mending their stockings. The aunt from Montauban beside her husband, on a low armchair, having fierce discussions together over every card.

"This one or that one?"

With the point of her knitting needle she suggested something else. Once Monsieur Masure said :

"Oh, come on, uncle, we know perfectly well that you've got the ace of spades."

Cries of protest!

"You've looked at my hand."

Note that he had called eight spades. It wasn't magic guessing that he had the ace.

"If you're starting to cheat . . ."

Masure sighed. I was bored. But pleasantly, comfortably. When the uncle was too slow there was always one of the Masure girls to give me a little smile of encouragement. That pleased me. Sometimes the young ladies played too, but they played rummy. There was often a young man too. He came for Elise, the second daughter. One day he brought a friend who read cards. The young ladies were very excited.

"A handsome man with fair hair," he would say. "I see a handsome man with fair hair. But there will be difficulties. I can see a separation. An important letter."

"Don't put ideas in their heads," suggested Madame Masure.

Where else could one have put them?

"Ah yes, ah yes, for you too, I can see a handsome young man. Very rich."

"But he marries someone else," said the uncle, fingering his cards.

He was fierce, the tax-collector. But they're often fierce in that profession.

"An accident. You'll be jealous of a widow."

The girls looked at him anxiously. And I, as I bent over my cards, my cards where no future was written, watching the uncle, cheating, I should like to have been this young man that all the girls looked at. Who interested



them. Who made them laugh. Who reigned over the little yellow universe of their lamplight.

"You'll come again to read the cards for us, won't you?" they said. "It's so interesting."

They insisted. Hortense especially. But he didn't come back. One evening too, Elise's young man took them all to the flicks. In the district.

"Ah, a nice quiet evening," said the uncle. "Now we can play seriously at last. Without that gaggle of geese."

And Masure, as he took me back, said:

"Oh, I understood his remark. He'd like me to send them to the flicks every night. But he can talk. He can pay for them.

"I could take them," I said.

Timidly.

"Sometime one evening . . ."

But Masure was astonished.

"Saddle yourself with a job like that? No, Magis. Not a bit of it. Whatever for? To please that old bore?"

I didn't dare insist. But why? Why shouldn't I want to take four girls to the cinema? Since someone else did the same thing.

## CHAPTER 19

And I went again. At six o'clock I left the office. Half-past six: Rose. Just before eight I went down to her flat. We had dinner. Then Eugène said:

"Coming to the *Escargot*, Magis?"

"I'm expected at the Masures."

They both began to laugh., Eugène with his loud laugh in three sections.

"Huh! Huh! Huh!"

Rose more calmly. Rose never really laughed but a sort of wave of amused indulgence passed over her face. Even at the flicks, at Charlie Chaplin films. Eugène let himself go. You couldn't hear anything else. Huh! Huh! Huh! People would look round. But Rose contented herself with smiling mysteriously, never quite coming out of herself.

"At the Masures! Again! Ah, you beast, you go for the four little girls. Don't come back in little pieces!"

But nicely. No jealousy. Rose and Eugène didn't need me. They didn't need anybody. Perhaps even not each other.

I left. I arrived at the Masures'. Hortense or Charlotte would be clearing the table.

"Good evening, Monsieur Magis!"

But he bored me, the uncle from Montauban. I can certainly say that he bored me. With his ways. The way he played. The way he discussed things. When we added up the money:

"Twelve sous? I owe you twelve sous? It's impossible. There's a mistake."

Already suspicious, he would say:

"I've won all the time."

"The beans are there, uncle."

Because we counted with beans.

"The beans, the beans. Twelve sous are twelve sous. And what about my little slam?"

"But you lost it, uncle."

"I lost it? I?"

We had to explain everything to him.

"Don't you remember, you had the king of hearts, I still had trumps, you weren't able to make the trick."

He counted his beans again.

"I'm not surprised you come every evening, Magis. You must make yourself a fortune here."

"I lost four francs the day before yesterday."

"Is that a reproach?"

"You shouldn't tease him like that, Monsieur Magis," said the aunt. "Yesterday again he couldn't sleep, he takes these things so much to heart."

Not even any modesty about their feelings.

And the aunt from Montauban, I assure you she was somebody too. She was two yards round at least. If they're all like that at Montauban, they must feel more than somewhat short of space. Sometimes, when the uncle was too slow playing, I amused myself imagining the aunt's behind. Well, each time it gave me a shock. And what arms! Red and swollen. Once, when Hortense was little, she had said:

"Auntie, aren't your arms going to burst?"

And, on top of all that a homicidal sort of look from behind the rimless spectacles.

"All right then, I owe you twelve sous."

With a sigh as from a broken heart. With a look of waiting for me to say 'Oh, no, let's forget it,' twelve sous, just imagine (as in this story of Alphonse Daudet's that has always delighted me. I say DELIGHTED in the strongest

sense of the word. The story of a Parisian smart alec, who, passing through some little town or other wins everything that he wants from a local youth who suddenly throws himself at his feet. 'I stole that money.' So the smart alec says to him: 'Silly, we were only playing for a joke.'). Only, with the uncle, I didn't say anything. I waited for the twelve sous. For the pleasure of infuriating him. And above all, the next day, if I lost, he didn't wait, the old puma.

"Magis, without wanting to disturb you, that makes one franc fifty that you owe me. Er—you can see from the counters. Good accounts make good friends."

All happy. And he looked at his wife. And she looked at him, the skin of his cheeks gleaming and his little eyes which from being homicidal became lewd. Lewd. I'm not inventing it. One franc fifty and the man became a swine. They communicated, both of them, in front of us. Happy. Rejoicing. For one franc fifty.

He bored me, I repeat. But I came back to him. Habit. Things are there. They bore you. You do them all the same. Go and find out why! The uncle and aunt bored the Masures too. It bored them to have them there. They had only come for a month, so-called, but after seven weeks they were still there, taking up all the room, sprawling all over, not moving their feet to let Madame Masure go past with a pile of plates in her hands. And the crowding it made in this small flat. The Masures had had to give them their own bedroom. Madame Masure slept with one of the daughters in a bed that was too narrow.

"It's not very pleasant, Monsieur Magis."

She poured her heart out to me, one night when the uncle and aunt had gone out. They'd gone to the Opera. Without even having thought of taking one of the girls—who were dying to go to the Opera. It's true that they

talked about the Opera for three days afterwards. It was *Tosca*.

"It's not very pleasant, Monsieur Magis. The other night I woke up and my head was hanging over the edge of the bed, LIKE A COW. I thought I was dead."

As for Masure, he put up a camp bed for himself in the corridor. I helped him while the uncle from Montauban was already doing his gargling in the bedroom. Masure sighed. Then his cheerful nature got the better of him again. He sat down on the edge of the bed and in a low voice told me dirty stories. Putting his hand over his mouth when he laughed. And he always laughed a little too soon.

"And do you know what the little nun said to him?"

And he roared with laughter. While I waited. Then the uncle came out, in his shirt, to go to the bathroom.

"It seems to me that some people have a good time," he said.

Suspicious.

"Is it me you're laughing at?"

"You? Oh no, uncle."

And he went along the corridor, shouting:

"Look out, look out, I'm coming."

For the girls. So that they wouldn't see him in his shirt. And if he saw a door open:

"I'm shouting on purpose. So your girls can shut the door, Marthe."

In other words, it upset the Masures. But they put up with it, they too. Didn't even mention when they would go. And there was no reason for it. Not the hint of a reason. There wasn't even any question of a legacy. The uncle had no money. Or hardly any. And then he'd already said that he was leaving it all to the League for the Rights of Man. Because he was left wing, the old vulture.

"I'm on the left," he said. "Like the heart. Ah, ha!"

“ But perhaps he said that just to annoy us,” said the good Madame Masure, “ and when he dies, we’ll have a surprise. You see how he is.”

They came back from the Opera with bright eyes, all lively and cheerful. Madame Masure rushed up to them.

“ Wasn’t it cold coming back?”

“ Well, now,” said the uncle. “ I’d be glad of a little liqueur.”

## CHAPTER 20

And all that without any reason, as I said. No, that's not quite true. There was a slight one. Concerning Rose and Eugène, there were no reasons, that's so. Exactly. Nothing to repeat, nothing to add. But with the Masures there was something else. No reasons? If you like. But no REAL reasons, in any case, no important reasons. But reasons for them. Excuses. Silly little things that they held out in front of themselves. Did the uncle get in their way?

"But he's our uncle. My father's brother."

As for reasons concerning Rose and Eugène, that was a desert. Not a tree, not a shadow. A desert that they were able to fill on their own, the two of them. That they occupied by themselves, up to the very corners, the very angles. Eugène on his chair, with his waistcoat undone, huh! huh! huh! Rose with her breasts and her behind. And round them: nothing. Leaving no room for anything. Their universe was themselves.

Whereas the Masures, to start with, took up less room (the system, as I've already pointed out, is always a certain reduction of oneself), but they filled up the space they left round themselves, which they could have left empty. They stuffed it full of their phoney reasons, their alibis, their screens. Note that it was less full up than with other people, such as my mother for example. There remained zones of emptiness, zones of shadow. But in the end the system was already there. With its traps. I went to bed with Rose and I went to see the Masures. One thing had no more reason to it than the other. It was simply habit. Things that had happened like that. But Rose at least knew it. She didn't fancy herself looking for any reason.

While the Masures had to have the excuse, the explanation, the alibi. The need to justify themselves (and in front of whom? One wonders).

"The uncle was there. He liked playing cards. So we invited Magis. He plays well."

The trap. The system coming back. When I left Rose and Eugène to go to the Masures, I wasn't content with changing my street (they lived high up in the rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau), I changed my world, I left liberty for reasons. Or caricatures of reasons: an excuse. I came into the pre-arranged programme. Even later, when the uncle and aunt finally left. When the original excuse had vanished, the Masures had mechanically invented another one. To justify the fact that they'd got used to my presence.

"Are you coming tomorrow, Magis? Oh yes, don't make excuses, You're a bachelor. You must feel lonely."

And Madame Masure would say:

"Oh yes, Monsieur Magis. When you come at least my husband doesn't go to his café. Into those smoky rooms."

And yet there were ventilators at the *Escargot*. But the system was there. The system which doesn't care a damn about ventilators or about truth. And which, in an underhand way, was pushing me up on its shoulders. First of all the excuse. Then the excuse which turned itself into a reason. A reason. And now after a certain time a reason imposed itself on me. It looked like nothing. A slight reason. Not even a reason: a simple remark.

It was a Sunday afternoon. I'd just arrived, some friends appeared, Masure's chief in the office, Monsieur Raffard, and his wife. Friendly. Kind. All smiles.

"That's what I call a surprise, Monsieur Raffard."

"A good one, I hope?"

"A wonderful one, Monsieur Raffard."



"Oh, Monsieur Masure, I see that you know his weak points."

"Just so, we have our friend Magis here."

But Raffard held back.

"And what about Madame Masure? Ah, I want to see Madame Masure with cards in her hand!"

"I play very badly, Monsieur Raffard."

"A pretty woman always plays too well, Madame Masure."

With a knowing look. Then Hortense said:

"Oh leave them to it, Monsieur Magis. Come with us. The young things will play rummy."

THE YOUNG THINGS WILL PLAY RUMMY. I don't know whether anyone can understand that. The young things? Me? Where they talking to me? The young things? And that included me? Can anyone understand why I was surprised? Why I was touched? Touched, yes. This sentence which passed over me. A garden. An old garden, dry, dusty, walled in. And at the back, a spring of water. A little spring. BUT IT WAS ALIVE. The young things? It was true, after all, that I was only twenty-five. The same age as Masure's eldest daughter. Not more, in fact. But I'd forgotten. Better still: I didn't know. And the others too didn't seem to know until now. Twenty-five? But when I came to the Masures it was for the parents. For the uncle.

"One of our friends," said Masure.

And not:

"One of the girls' friends."

Monsieur Masure. And Madame Masure. And Rose who was thirty-nine. And Eugène who was forty-eight. The young things? And it was me. The young things will play rummy. This rummy was me. These young things included me. This phrase was said for me. It contained me. It hid me. It sheltered me.

'In the girls' corner . . . ' which on other days I looked at from a distance, from my whist table, the corner that was closed to me, forbidden, another egg, an egg that I hadn't even thought of going into. And now I was going into it. AS THOUGH IT WAS NATURAL. And nobody was surprised.

"Yes, of course," said Monsieur Raffard. "Young things with young things. We'll know how to manage without them, won't we, Madame Masure?"

And Masure himself, won over, no doubt seeing me in a new light, leaning over us as he went to find a bottle of anisette:

"Everything all right, children?"

Children? Me? Charlotte, the youngest, teased me. I laughed. I TOLD STORIES. At one point I even laughed all on my own without being able to stop. From happiness. They looked at me. And Monsieur Raffard with a look of sympathy over his chilly nose, said:

"Enjoying yourself, young man?"

"They make so much noise," said Madame Masure.

"Oh, never mind, Madame Masure. They're young. Worries will come soon enough."

And later when he left:

"Until the next time, young man. I like young people to be gay."

Young people? Me? For the first time in my life. (So much so that the very next day I stroked the bottom of the little sixteen-years-old maid who came to Rose's to do the charring.

"So you're fed up with the old girl, are you?" she asked me. "Not too soon, either."

I laughed shamefacedly. I laughed at something unknown which stirred deep down inside me. But, before the remark about the young things, I'd never have thought

about the little maid. Like other people don't think about stroking a centenarian.)

THE YOUNG THINGS WILL PLAY RUMMY. Who would have thought of that? Such a little thing. And Hortense with her big steady mouth and her freckles. Ah, I can say that that sentence mattered for me, and changed something in my life. After that I went back to the Measures with enthusiasm, impatience and feverishness. Note that I often had to take my place again at the whist table. Because of my talent. But it was never the same again. Neither for me nor for the others. I was like a cousin who had concealed his parentage for a time. I was treated differently. Even Madame Measure, in spite of her little ways. She still didn't dare call me Emile, but she didn't say 'Monsieur Magis' any more. She said: my dear Magis. Or even: Magis dear. And she didn't hesitate any more to ask favours from me.

"Magis dear, can you help me move the table?"

And it was the same thing with the girls.

"Monsieur Magis, my musical box has gone wrong. Do you think you could look at it?"

Or else:

"Something's happened to the handle. The window won't shut. Monsieur Magis, you're so handy!"

And Measure, whose face creased into happy wrinkles round his pipe, said:

"Magis, don't let yourself get turned into a convenience."

"Oh that's all right, Monsieur Measure."

I was devoted. Busy. Full of good reasons from now on. One day it was the castor on a bed which had come off. The youngest daughter, Charlotte, had taken me to see the damage. I got busy, I took a deep breath, I mended it.

"There," I said.

"You're very kind," she said.

She had little round cheeks, with all the roundness gathered into one point (into two rather, one for each cheek, in fact).

"Oh," I said, "I have my compensations."

I went close to her. Then she undid my jacket and passed her hand all over my chest, very quickly, with a sort of greediness, looking at me and saying nothing.

We did it again from time to time. I would arrive. In the distance from behind an open door (the Masures lived with their doors open), she would shout:

"Monsieur Magis, you know the handle that you mended, it's gone wrong again."

"Let's go and look at it."

And Masure would say:

"Magis, you're too easy going. They'll be doing anything they want with you in the end."

"Oh it's all right, Monsieur Masure."

And I would go and find Charlotte. And she would do it again. Always the same thing. Never anything more. Her hand foraged in my chest, as though she wanted to take my wallet—she didn't, I hasten to add—I checked on it—and in any case I keep my wallet in my hip pocket.

# CHAPTER 21

All that isn't very exciting. I know. All that is not at all extraordinary, I'm the first to agree. But you mustn't go by appearances, either. Charlotte felt me in the region of my tie. That was nothing, agreed, A hint. A decoration. A fairy story.

But there was also something which beat BELOW my tie. My heart. My soul. And there something had changed. Everything still looked the same. But nothing was the same any more. Because I'd begun to live with reasons. I acted with reasons. I went to the Measures. Before it had been habit. Now there were reasons for it. Reasons more or less satisfactory, but reasons all the same. The tie. The young things will play rummy. Now, I tell you. WHEN YOU BEGIN TO LIVE WITH REASONS YOU'RE RIPE FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN. Because reasons make you enter into the system—and the system attracts, provokes and asks something to happen. Because the system, at bottom, if you look into it well, the system is worry. Or a remedy against worry, which is the same thing. A board that you nail over your worry. But which isn't enough to stifle it. You can still hear the worry moving, yawning, filing its nails along the boards. Do you think I'm inventing it? I only have a glimpse of it, it's true, but I'm sure of what I'm saying. First of all, listen to them, the people, the people in the system, the people with reasons.

“It was horrible, it couldn't last.”

Or even:

“It was too beautiful, it couldn't last.”

It couldn't last, that's their phrase. Worry, in fact. Now why? Where is it written that things can't last? **EVERYTHING CAN LAST.** Both horrible and wonderful things. But on the condition that nothing moves. On condition that no questions are asked. Like Rose and Eugène. Who lived without suffering, but why? Because they lived without reasons. Without ever wondering if. While the Masures, with the airs they gave themselves, their flat, their piano-sideboard, they worried.

"Suppose there were a war . . ."

Or :

"If Masure died, I'd be left with four daughters."

Because of the reasons. You say to yourself :

"I'm happy. Why?"

You look for the reasons behind your happiness. You find them. That's the drama of the reasons. When you look for them you find them. And then you notice that they're precarious. Unstable. At the mercy of a gust of wind. Or that they could be perfected.

"I'm happy. Why? Because Masure is there and he earns a good living. But Masure might die."

Worry. You look for a solution.

"He earns three thousand francs a month. But if he earned three thousand five hundred, we could put something aside."

There is a sign that something will happen. You beckon to it: it comes. It's too natural. And because of what? Reasons. The system. Once in the system, you think of how long it will last. Then worry comes along.

Had I got to the worrying stage already? Worry that I'd already suffered from so much because of the system in the shape of *am I a monster then?* and which now came back to me, still because of the system, but in the shape of: *What shall I do to make this last? What shall I do to perfect it?* - No, there was not yet any real worry. It was

still only uneasiness. And it was intermittent. Because of Rose. Because of Rose, who fortunately was still there. And still the same. I would come back home. I would find her in my room.

"There was a hold-up on the tube," I said. "Some woman had chucked herself under a train."

I was all worked up because I was already thinking about the upset my story would cause among the Masures. It was like them to get agitated over nothing. But as for Rose:

"Really?" she said.

Without asking for details and taking off her skirt, looking at her behind in the wardrobe mirror. A character, I can tell you. It's true, any other woman would have got angry at the regularity with which I went to the Masures. With those four girls. Or she would already have made allusions. In a mean sort of way. On one side of her face. She would have teased me. But Rose couldn't care less. Or she would even say:

"Look, you've got a button missing. Give it to me, I'll sew it on for you. You must look nice to go to the Masures."

Sometimes, through Masure contagion, system contagion, I would say to myself:

"Good heavens, three years now and still the same woman. It can't go on like that."

Always the same phrase. The trap. Worry. Why shouldn't it go on? I'd have found it really difficult to say why. And the Eiffel Tower, doesn't that last? AND THE ROCK?

"Wonderful curves, yes, but damn it, there are others, perhaps just as wonderful or more peculiar and all this time they're growing older."

Worry. Questions. Wondering if. The sense of duration. Of time passing by. And the worry that results

from it. Still one more of the forms of the system, never being able to do anything without wondering whether, at that very moment, you couldn't be doing something better or more important. AS THOUGH ONE THING COULD BE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANOTHER. As though it wasn't possible to limit yourself to one set of curves. And faithfulness? Doesn't faithfulness exist? As though all the other sets of curves concerned me. Now here is one more of the secrets: THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS WHICH DON'T CONCERN US. A simple truth. A salutary truth. About which the system obviously doesn't want to hear anything. People say:

"Have you heard? About China? Look at what's going on."

What the hell does it matter to them? Perhaps they're Chinese? Perhaps they have a family in Shanghai?

But Rose came. Rose came into my room, into my egg, into my universe, and all my reasonings receded, all my little ideas, my reasons, my incentives, which, without even knowing it, her big body, by the solitary virtue of its presence, shattered against the shell of the egg. She came in: there was nothing more except her. Why? Because there were none of these gaps in her which are left by reasons, questions and worries. She was there—and there was no room for anything else. Not even for me. Or rather there was only the necessary bit of me left. I repeat it, the strength of that woman was that she never asked herself why she slept with me. NEVER. Neither whether it would last. Would I still be there tomorrow? She didn't care. I was. She was. No worries. Would it last? But it was there. Her big face, her solid cheeks, her gold tooth, her jumper, always a jumper, in the golfing style, with the bottom button fastened, and the two sides like two wings over her big breasts. She sat down. She raised her feet to take her shoes off. Without even waiting for my opinion. Because for her the question didn't even



exist. And I began to exist. In her. I began to exist for her and at the same time I began to exist for me and I filled my egg right to the very corners, with no room for anything else. AND IT WAS MARVELLOUS.

But when Rose had gone it began all over again.

"Her curves, after all."

Like a fool. Ah, I was ready for something to happen. It's only a detail that it didn't happen through me. Events often happen from the outside, but nine times out of ten they only happen to the people who hold out a handle to them.

So one evening I arrived at the Masures and I found Masure himself all alone with his pipe. It must have been arranged because in that small flat with the five women it was pretty rare to have a tête à tête.

"Magis," he said.

He looked at me from behind his pipe, with his legs stretched out (he was sitting down, obviously), his hands together below his pipe.

"I'm fond of you, Magis. And sometimes I worry a bit about your future."

The future, worrying, bothering about something that isn't your business, worry, the perfectionist mania: the system, in fact. All the craziness of the system. And I didn't recognise it. I could still have stopped everything.

"I think that I've got something for you."

Pointing at me with the stem of his pipe. Cheerful. Then leaning over, tapping me on the knee:

"Magis, there's a vacancy at the Ministry."

He stopped, with his hand still on my knee.

"I thought of you immediately."

"You're too kind, Monsieur Masure."

He leant back in his chair:

"Now, listen, I don't want you to make your decision in a hurry. Rivet's is certainly a good firm. Solid firm."

You may have a good future there. But for prestige, Magis. For prestige there's nothing like the Ministry."

He sucked his pipe.

"I've already said a word about it to Monsieur Raffard. He's inclined to support you. If you agree, he'll mention it tomorrow to the big white chief."

In short, one thing followed another, two months later I was a clerk in the Ministry of Public Health. And Madame Masure was thrilled.

"Now you're one of us, Magis dear."

One of the people I even managed to surprise this time was Rose.

"To the Ministry? Good God!"

"Precisely, my dear Rose."

She couldn't get over it. Then she fingered the corner of her mouth, with her chin stuck out like the toe of a shoe. That showed that she was thinking.

"But there must be some reason why this Masure man takes an interest in you."

That was her weakness. The rift in the best of characters. But Rose acted all the same without reasons. And she knew it. This didn't prevent her sometimes from looking for reasons in other people.

"How many daughters has he got?"

"Four."

"Mmm."

After that we got to work on each other from the waist down. After that too, one evening the Masures suggested that it would be nice perhaps if I gave a little dinner to celebrate my appointment.

"Oh, that would be fun!"

The four Masure girls jumped for joy.

"We shan't ask for heaps of food, you know, Magis, but a nice little dinner, like Henry of Navarre, you know."

Why like Henry of Navarre? With a chicken in the pot, perhaps?

"You could even do it here, at our place, couldn't he, Marthe? You're a bachelor, you've no home, we all understand."

I said O.K. In one sense too it didn't happen at a bad moment, since at Rivet's, where they were pleased with me, they'd given me a bonus of a thousand francs when I left.

"Who shall we invite?"

Hortense took a pencil. Methodical.

"Who? Now let's see . . ."

Monsieur Raffard, of course. Top of the list. And his wife. And his kid. The big white chief. We could try, but he wasn't friendly with the staff. He would refuse. But the gesture would touch him, all the same.

"Your mother, surely . . ."

"My poor mother? The journey would be too tiring for her."

That was already the Masure style.

"But my sister. With her husband. He works at the N.B.C.I."

Madame Masure purred approvingly. I wanted to invite Rose and Eugène too. Monsieur Masure objected.

"You see, Magis, I understand your feelings perfectly, but . . . At the beginning you always think you can keep all these friends, and then . . ."

"If they're nice," said Hortense.

I insisted. I invited them. And I'm sure that I shan't surprise anyone when I say that of all the guests (except, of course, the Masure females), they were the ones who behaved best. Because towards the end Raffard told a few risky stories. One about flies in particular. All the time shouting at his kid.

"Edgar! Respect your father! Don't listen."

As for Masure and Gustave, they got pretty tight. While Eugène contented himself with singing something which was as respectable as can be, called 'Mother,' and it made everyone cry big tears, even the waiter from the *Escargot*, who couldn't bear it any more and had to lean on Monsieur Raffard's shoulder, he was so overcome with emotion. It was a real success! (Except for Rose, naturally, who didn't care a damn.)

"Ah," said Raffard, "your song . . . or rather your poem, I should say. And you're a friend of this gay young dog Magis? Sentimental as you are. For you are, sir. Yes, you're sentimental."

Because, for Monsieur Raffard, I was a gay young dog. He had seen me laugh one day. Ever since then I'd been classified as a gay young dog for ever. That's how he'd announced me at the Ministry. It had even led to disappointments.

As for Rose, I heard her talking to Charlotte.

"A child, you know. A real child. You have to think of everything for him."

Rose was talking about me. With a motherly air. Reasonable. Ah, I assure you, you'd have needed a peculiar sort of nasty mind to imagine anything. And Charlotte, listening to her with the air of a little girl trying not to laugh, sarcastically, as though she was saying: 'Oh, go on, you silly old thing, if you knew what I did with your innocent boy, how I feel him round the chest!' And Rose going on:

"But he has a good heart, you know."

Because that woman saw a long way ahead. And even further ahead than all the others who were there. I realise you're going to laugh in my face and say there's nothing wonderful about that, we've understood too, we can see him coming, Masure, with his kind heart, his big feet and his four daughters who've got to be married off.

you're still very green, Magis. Green, green, that's easily said. But I have eyes to see with, perhaps. Well, I can tell you, when Masure put my name forward for the Ministry he wasn't thinking of anything, he wasn't thinking any further. Later, yes. But not at the beginning. Kindness exists. Unselfishness exists. People deny it—that's the system. Hasn't it ever happened to you? In the street, seeing someone come along who looks lost, haven't you ever gone up to him to help him out? Without being forced to do it? Without having anything to gain from it? Well? The proof, in fact, as far as the Masures are concerned is that for several more months everything went on just as it was before. Without any change. Without any reference being made. I went to the Ministry. I did my work. Which pleased me, for that matter. Truly. Because, I tell you, I won't say that the work they do in the Ministries is no use to anyone, oh no, but at least you can't see straightaway what use it is. Now that's reassuring. You don't feel you have any responsibilities. A Ministry is rather like the Army—a big stock of nothingness that hardly ever moves. And then, no boss. Or rather a different sort of boss. Monsier Raffard was my chief, yes, and he was less easy than Monsieur Rivet, certainly. More finicky. But all the same Rivet was like an enormous Buddha in the midst of us, who absorbed us, I would say, who sucked us out of existence. Without even suspecting it, perhaps. Because of us, rather. Yes, because of the staff itself. His secretary would arrive:

“Monsieur Rivet asked me to remind you . . .”

As though she had spoken of the Pope. Because at Rivet's, obviously, Rivet was everything. All at once. The man who at the same time paid you, ordered you about, dismissed you. If I had wanted to despise Rivet, I wouldn't have been able to manage it. Whereas in the Ministries you can despise people. Possibly just because it isn't the same

man who pays you and who orders you about. A chief clerk in fact is on a different level from you, yes, but that doesn't mean that he belongs to a different species, like Rivet. Not even the director-general. As for the minister, he's just fantasy. The passing cloud. The snow-flake. I've had four different ministers. If I hadn't seen their photographs in the papers I wouldn't even have known what they looked like. Also, in my view, everything would go much better if everybody worked for the state. Hey presto, everybody in a ministry! People will say, where would one go to look for work? But work is something different. People don't want work, they want employment. A job. Somewhere to go every morning. With a salary that comes along every month. Not even a big one: people aren't really greedy. Something to live on. Without worry. Without responsibilities. Something you don't have to bother about. And as for work, well, you could always make them copy things. Or nationalise everything that exists. And they'd keep quiet all the time.

So I went to the Ministry. But at the same time, little by little, unknown to me, things were ripening. The incident was looming larger. Reaching its limit. Of course, in the end, the Masures finished by seeing in me a possible son-in-law. Now that I WAS ONE OF THEM. The system went on. And one evening I found Masure alone again with his pipe. (That's the terrible thing, once you start to look after other people, you can't stop. Once you've spoken frankly, you finish by inventing things so that you can go on, I don't know if you've noticed it.)

"The little girl loves you, Magis. Oh, yes, she does. Don't argue, it's not a crime. What can you do? We can't control our feelings."

Too kind.

"You have a nice job now."

And one day I found myself married. To Charlotte? No, I must confess it wasn't her. It was Hortense, rather. Who had never felt me round the chest. The eldest. By seniority in one way. But why. Go and find out. Things happened like that. Besides, it was Hortense whom they offered me. Not Charlotte. And I'll add, Hortense or Charlotte, in the end I didn't even know if I preferred one to the other. The whole story, for me, was this tableful of young girls who one day had said to me: we young things will play rummy. Like an egg. I thought it was closed. Then a door had opened. Hortense door or Charlotte door? Was it important? First of all, it was Hortense who had uttered the phrase. Then I had stroked Charlotte, it's true, and she'd felt me over the chest. But marriage is something more than stroking each other, isn't it? In short. And Rose looked after my trousseau.

## CHAPTER 22

Hortense, I ought to talk about Hortense. I ought to: I wrote the phrase quite naturally, mechanically. I'm sure that it won't have startled anyone. And yet what goes with these words *ought to*? I ought to? But where is the duty? Where is the obligation for me to talk about Hortense rather than about my ash-tray? I set myself the task, when I began this story, of describing only the things and people that had some importance for me. And suppose I find personally that my wife wasn't important? Aren't I free? I ought to? But in connection with whom? To whom have I an obligation? Her memory? A woman who deceived me?

The truth is that I have nothing to say about Hortense. Or practically nothing. Fourteen months after her death I've almost forgotten her. And it seems to me that I forgot her already when she was alive. I can see and hear my mother and my sister. I listen: there are their voices. But Hortense? Buried. Disappeared. And certainly she would have been more so if she didn't go on living with such strength and obstinacy in the memory of other people and the neighbours. Because I can see very clearly that they never say more than two words to me without thinking of the tragedy, and Hortense. I'm no longer Magis Emile. I'm the husband of. The bloke who. They don't talk to me about it, but the effort that they make not to mention it seems each time as though they'd been talking to me about it for hours.

So . . .

But no, that's no good. I can say what I like, a marriage is a marriage. When I married I changed my life,



I can say that any way I want to. I changed my flat and my habits. Doesn't matter? That's easily said. Too easily said. She lived with me, after all. Hortense. And all the same, it's as though she hadn't existed. Perhaps there is something else apart from the importance of actions and people. Perhaps we're like some sort of gear-wheels, which depending on the spacing of their teeth, mesh or don't mesh. Perhaps there are people, actions and words that remain floating on our surface, while others you might say penetrate into us, act as levers, move things and change us. I think that the cogs for Hortense and me didn't coincide. We just turned round next to each other, that's all. But she didn't displease me all the same. Anything but. She was a fine figure of a woman. Tall, a handsome pink face verging slightly on brown, with freckles, and red patches too round the lips. And a fairly well marked down; especially at the angle of the cheeks, underneath, at the places where I myself find it difficult to shave well, A big broad body. Long strong legs. A smell which I liked. Usually she was silent. Even-tempered.

Our honeymoon. Ridiculous! I started off to talk about my soul and here I am with stories about my honeymoon. What about my soul? Yes, my soul? Especially because as far as the honeymoon was concerned, we contented ourselves with Montlognon. In the Oise district. Near Senlis. An address that Raffard gave.

"There's a little inn there, my friends, you must let me know how it's getting on . . ."

Hortense wanted to go somewhere else. We gave up the idea. Apparently it would have upset Raffard. In fact the district was pleasant. A river, A wooden bridge. A wash-place by the water—with never anyone there. As for comfort, it didn't exist. But there's love, isn't there? And at your age. A honeymoon. Raffard's line.

Which meant that after two days Hortense said to me :

**"All the same I must have a real wash."**

I said O.K. She went on:

**"I feel uncomfortable with you there."**

All right. I went out. I loafed about. I went as far as the bridge. I came back. There was still splashing in the bedroom. I was preoccupied. Always the Masure influence. Reasons. Ask yourself questions. Put things in order. Always agitating. Asking myself: now let's see, isn't that letting her get into bad habits? CAN I allow her to throw me out like this? Isn't it a bad habit? All the time pacing up and down the corridor. A corridor that sloped sideways. Which smelt of wood and paper.

Now, at the end of this corridor, there was a door open and there was the maid messing about with the linen.

**"Good morning,"** she said.

I swear that I replied automatically, and that I leant against the door automatically too.

**"You look fed up."**

I said I was.

Automatically. And I finished by automatically putting my hand where one usually puts it. She had a funny face, that maid, which went in all directions at once, bunched up, her nose in the air, her mouth crooked, her forehead concave, her tits in one direction, her behind in another. And me feeling all of it, wondering all the time if I OUGHT to put up with things, if I COULD put up with them. And in one way I think, transferring to the hand that I was feeling with the energy that I wanted to put into my observations to Hortense.

The maid looked down, half turning her head.

**"That seems to have some effect on you."**

Me? I said yes. If I'd said no, what sort of a fool would I have looked?

**"So you find me better than your wife, do you?"**

I didn't say anything. But she insisted.

"Than your silly big wife?"

I said yes. Then she laughed. A short laugh.

"You've got a real dirty mind."

And she threw me out of the room, banging the door in my face. Oh, I wouldn't have thought any more about it, but the trouble was that in the evening when she served us at table, she laughed all the time. A short little laugh. She brought the soup:

"There you are."

And she laughed again.

"What's the matter with that girl, laughing all the time?" asked Hortense. "Can you look, have I got a bit of parsley stuck in my teeth?"

"No, you haven't."

The next day there was the same carry-on. She couldn't even bring the salt without laughing.

"It's getting irritating," said Hortense. "You ought to say something to her."

1?

"What? Stop someone from laughing? But that's the charm of youth, always laughing."

I laughed myself, wagging my elbows, in order to look a bit more gay, I was embarrassed.

"Would you prefer someone who looked sulky?"

"That's true," said Hortense.

And in an amiable way she gave the giggling girl an understanding look over the braised beef.

"They're happy in this part of the world."

After the honeymoon she often referred to it.

"It's the water," said Monsieur Masure. "I believe that water plays a great part in making people happy. Because of the gall-bladder."

There's still one thing that I've got to say. A detail. People will still laugh at me, but, as I've already said, truth can only go forward thanks to the books whose author

accepts the risk of people laughing at him. And besides . . . In short, to put things bluntly, I got the impression that Hortense was not a virgin. I said: I got the impression. No more. I'm not sure. The thing seemed to me—still seems—so unlikely. And then, I'm no authority on this question. I'd no experience. Oh, I admit it without being embarrassed. Is it such an important science that you must blush to admit it? And you? Do you know the difference between a dahlia and a tulip? If so, congratulations. If not, do you care much? Does it shame you to admit it? Not at all. People will simply say:

“Well, botany isn't Gaston's strong point.”

Without thinking of laughing at you. So why make such a fuss about the science which consists in knowing whether a woman is a virgin or not. You'll tell me: but it's all very simple. Fine. But the dahlia and the tulip are simple too. You don't know? All right, you don't know. There's no need to tear your hair out. You can't know everything. I prefer to say it, not only because of the detail (which is unimportant), but because I always think of other people—of the thousands of others who are perhaps like me, who aren't very sure about the question and that bothers them, worries them and fences them in; perhaps they'll be liberated by my confession. That reminds me of a remark by the uncle from Montauban, one day, during whist. It was in fact the only intelligent remark I ever heard him make.

“Masure,” he said, “the Marquis de Sade, when did that man live?”

“Oh, er, the time of the Revolution, I think.”

“But in that case what were the sadists called before that?”

You'll ask me what the connection is? This is the connection: before the Marquis de Sade, each sadist probably thought himself a monster unique of his type.

something new, unpublished, a horror that had never been known before. And he suffered from it, in fact. He must have suffered from it. And if he wanted to explain, he had to have a whole story ready. Without counting, of course, the fact that he didn't DARE explain himself, for fear of finding in the astonishment and the terror of other people a confirmation of his solitude. Isn't that true? Always the same thing. So the marquis arrived to bring him this double consolation: a label, and the certainty that he wasn't the only one. The certainty that they were at least two: the marquis and he. That sort of thing is comforting. And so is the label. The moment you can hide behind a word, you feel less lonely already. Once they were able to write on their back the word: sadist . . . So, perhaps it will be the same thing, on a smaller scale, for the people who aren't very sure about the virginity question. Because of me.

I must add also that this discovery about Hortense, as far as I'm concerned, didn't particularly strike me. I was above all surprised. I said to myself: At the Masures! Chaperoned as she was! And finding the way to! The wife wasn't so dumb. But I repeat that I wasn't even sure about it.

## CHAPTER 23

So, there was the honeymoon. Then the return and the settling in. THE START OF A NEW LIFE. Oh, it's so irritating! all these things that I've still got to tell, all that I've got to sort out. That flat now! Perhaps I should say a word about our flat. BUT I DON'T CARE A DAMN about the flat. Am I telling fairy-stories or what? What is a flat, after all? A drawer where you tidy yourself away. Three or four shoe-boxes in a row. With a staircase to get there. And windows. Is that worth talking about? The flat was in the rue de Provence. On the second floor if you want to know. Gustave came to help me with the wall-paper. Always kind-hearted.

"Now, Emile, if I were you . . ."

"O.K.," I said.

And I began to get bored. Bored is the right word. Hortense, the furniture, the bits of linen, all that for me was emptiness. Nothingness. Or it was like a dream. But a dream which I knew to be a dream. In which I knew that nothing concerned me. Hortense turning round beside me, but like a wheel made for another machine. Because I didn't love her? Sorry. If it had been a question of not loving her I wouldn't have said a dream, I'd have said a nightmare. No, I really think I loved her. As far as one can say, of course—I refer you to what I said above—concerning Gustave's remark. I loved her. In spite of the few funny little habits that she had. Her planning, for example. She would say:

"Ah, today I'll do the silver."

Fine. Then all day she would go on

"I mustn't forget the silver."

Or

"Roast beef? But my dear man, I've got the silver to do. I hadn't time to do roast beef."

And at night when she went to bed

"That silver."

Infuriating! But it was a detail in fact. Without counting that with the Ministry I hadn't got much time to spend with her. I left at half past eight in the morning, came back for lunch, left again and got back at half past six. I was even pleased to be back. But it was a pleasure that remained on the surface. Like bits of wood on top of the water. Floating. Which didn't mix with me. I tried to discover why.

Of course things are never easy. I think I can say however that at the basis of the whole business, at the origin of my marriage, there was the thrill of enthusiasm that I had felt at the remark: the young things will play rummy. With that I'd felt something. I'd experienced something. Well, with my marriage I got the impression that this something faded away. I'd lost the phrase. The enthusiasm had subsided. The young things will play rummy. Sometimes I repeated it to myself. But there, the two of us *tête à tête* in our flat . . . In the first place two people don't play rummy. And further, it would have been futile to pretend that all that depended on one game of cards rather than another. So I began to wonder whether the young thing, as far as I was concerned, was really Hortense and if all the magic of the thing didn't reside in the ensemble made up of Hortense AND her three sisters. I don't know if I make myself understood. I'm trying to simplify things, however.

Whatever the reasons, I began to wear out Hortense about going to see the family more often. That didn't go down well because she'd had enough of her family in fact.

But in the end she gave in. We would go and see the Masures.

"Well," she would say when we arrived, "Emile insisted on coming."

The Masures were delighted.

"A son-in-law who's fond of his family? Where can we put that on record?"

And Madame Masure, pouring out the coffee, said

"I can say that I've had my reward."

But nothing was ever the same again. There was no more of the 'young things will play rummy'. I thought I'd left the parents for the children. Result: I was between two stools. With Hortense. Three groups instead of two. My sisters-in-law called me Emile now. But I could see clearly that in one sense, for them, I'd lost part of my existence. Now that I was married I wasn't interesting any more. As a brother-in-law I came into a category where I was cheek by jowl with the uncle from Montauban and the sideboard in the dining-room. And for Hortense too it wasn't the same thing any more. Before there was the egg. The girls' corner. Under their lamp. Through one sentence I had managed to get into it. Fine. I'd thought I would get further into it by marrying one of the representatives of the egg. But all I had managed was to take Hortense out of the egg. To start a new egg with her, the young-couple egg. Which, for me, was a desert. I'd married her to get away from whist. All I had done was to take her into whist. Now she played with us. Whilst, in their corner, with Raoul, Elise's boy-friend, the girls went on playing rummy.

"Oh, rummy," commented Hortense.

Sounding as though she had passed that stage.

And it was Raoul now who was asked to mend the handles. One day all the same I managed to be alone with Charlotte. I went up close to her.



"What's the matter with you?" she asked.

Before I'd been Monsieur Magis. Now I was a relation but I couldn't come near to her any more. Where was the logic of that? What a stupid world. I seized the smallest opportunities to get her into corners. She was furious.

"I'll tell Hortense."

What would she tell? Or else, overcome:

"Leave me alone! Will you leave me alone?"

With her big yellow curl over her forehead. Her little face which took on a suffering look. I got even more angry. Ah, you can definitely say that men consist of contradictions.

"You ought to be ashamed!"

Ashamed of what? Didn't anybody understand me then? Who would have understood that I was running after Charlotte in order to get nearer still to Hortense. To find her again. To create again the egg that had been destroyed. In the end that revolted me. What? Because I'd taken part of the egg had I to lose it? Was that fair?

"Charlotte, give me your handkerchief!"

She was nervously screwing up a little pink handkerchief in her hands.

"Why?"

"As a souvenir."

She looked at me.

"I hate you."

She didn't call me Emile any more. That gave me hope. But not a bit of it.

"Leave me alone or I'll shout."

But I was her brother-in-law all the same. Isn't a brother-in-law almost a brother?

And then one day, when there were only three of us for whist, since Madame Masure didn't want to play, we took Charlotte. She said:

"I'll sit on my handkerchief. It brings good luck."

Laughing about it.

Fine. When the game was over I swiped the handkerchief. Then all at once it was time for goodbye, and Hortense was putting on her goloshes, as it was wet.

"Where's my handkerchief?"

Charlotte began to look. I pretended to look too.

"It's you," she said suddenly. "You've taken it."

She was suddenly furious, and her little face was vindictive under her yellow curls.

"But, Charlotte," said Masure, "why should he take your handkerchief? He's got handkerchiefs of his own."

I could still have said it was a joke. But the crisis was coming rapidly.

"He took it. I KNOW he did."

She was shaking.

"He pesters me all the time."

She shouted.

"Chasing me into corners. So that he can touch me. Making advances to me."

That was a Masure phrase, making advances.

"Now, it's my handkerchief!"

And everyone was looking at us. Madame Masure's bosom began to heave.

"But why a handkerchief?"

"To have something of mine. He said so. The other day."

And Masure said:

"It's beyond me."

And Madame Masure said:

"Such horrible things! In a family . . ."

One more good piece of reasoning. A man and his sister-in-law, that's got to happen in a family, hasn't it?

"A handkerchief! But that's vicious."

"I suspected it," cried Elise.

The balloon went up and then down. Acid remarks. Insults. Mean little allusions.

"I told you, Masure, to make some enquiries."

All that over a handkerchief! It was feeble.

Masure became a little calmer.

"Come on, Emile, give the handkerchief back."

And I, stupidly, asked :

"What handkerchief?"

Masure got on his high horse again. Did I take them for suckers or what? I'd better say. In short we left in a certain amount of confusion. And the first time that I mentioned going to the Masures again after that, Hortense indicated that she would go by herself, that it was better. Without giving any reasons. Another Masure speciality: if things embarrassed them, they were never mentioned. Silence. Like the grave. That poor little handkerchief. Buried in silence. As though it had never existed. I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't dare put it in a drawer, or Hortense would have found it. In the end I put it down a drain. And I went back to Rose.

## CHAPTER 24

I went back to Rose, there it is. Without explanation, reasons or procedure. I was surrounded by reasons, Measure-reasons, the Measure-system—and then with that woman, I only had to think of her for every single reason to disappear from the horizon. Note that for a whole long time I hadn't thought about Rose any more. When I got married I thought that it was a matter of course we wouldn't see each other again. And for her too things had gone on as before. She had looked after my trousseau. The couple had sent us a coffee service. Fine. And then Rose had disappeared from my life. I didn't think of her any more, I repeat. Then, one afternoon at the Ministry, soon after the handkerchief episode, I thought of her, and all at once, from one minute to the next, I don't know how to describe it, my thought was there in front of me, and all at once, without my knowing how, it wasn't there in front of me any longer, but inside me, right inside, like a discomfort in the region of my thorax and I swear that the skin of my chest contracted. The word may seem strong, but I don't exaggerate. At six o'clock, without waiting a moment, I dashed to the rue Montorgueil. No, I went. I didn't run. You must understand. This action didn't please me. In one sense, I felt myself irritated and humiliated. But I had something like a big, soft, slow-moving ox pushing me in the back, and it weighed heavy. And plenty of saliva, that goes without saying.

I arrived. I rang. Hell, it was Eugène who opened the door. I hadn't thought of that.

"Magis!" he said.

In his shirt sleeves and his waistcoat, with the big door open. And behind, Rose, doing the ironing, leaning over the iron, with one shoulder down, her big breasts unhorizontal—because of her position—in a red satin blouse.

“Hullo,” she said.

“Come in,” said Eugène.

And he began to laugh.

“Already,” he said. “Damn you, Magis.”

He laughed again and then he stopped laughing. He looked at me. Rose hadn’t moved, she was still leaning over her iron, and she looked at me too, with her look in which, I don’t know if I make myself understood, in which there was never room for anything except what she was looking at. And it was sad. We looked at each other there, all three of us, as though we were standing round a dead body. We looked at each other and I must say that the thing between us was like a hole from which rose a sort of misery. A hole from which rose despair. Or perhaps shame. Or something else. Rose. And Eugène with his waistcoat open. And me, with my hat in my hand. Not proud, any of us.

It was Eugène again who got hold of himself first.

“Damn you, Magis,” he said again.

He didn’t sound very sure of himself. Then Rose put the iron down on the little stand where irons are kept. She shrugged her shoulders.

“You’d better go for a little walk, Eugène.”

He looked at her from his side. It all happened very slowly.

“If you want me to . . .”

He went in front of the mantelpiece to put his tie back on again. Then he came back to the middle of the room with his jacket in his hand.

“Where can I go? There won’t be anyone at the *Escargot* at this time.”

"Don't worry about that," said Rose.

Like a woman who's had enough. Then, more kindly :

"Would you rather stay? I'm not telling you to go away for hours."

He looked at me vacantly.

"So long."

"So long."

Near the door, he turned round again.

"So I'm going out?"

He went out. Rose opened her bedroom door. She went in. The light was on. A little bedside lamp, with a shade like a flower upside down, mauve-coloured, looking as though it were a long way away.

"Well," she said. "Are you coming or not?"

I went in too. She was already taking off her red blouse, still looking as though she'd had enough. Ah, a character like hers; it's rare, I can assure you.

"This'll do for today," she said. "Next time we'll go to a hotel. Eugène likes sitting by the fire. It would disturb him."

Talking calmly as though it had been decided forever that there should be a next time.

"That'll cost you money."

"Oh, I understand," I said.

Then, later :

"So, the day after tomorrow, at half-past six, at the café at the corner of the rue Marie-Stuart."

I said O.K.

And everything began again. But there too, it wasn't quite the same. Now, at this point I'd like to note an observation that I've made, and which perhaps carries some weight. People talk about love. Fine. About desire. Fine. They add: you can't control love. Nor desire. I think everyone agrees about that. Feelings generally, for that matter. Sympathy and antipathy. You can't control

your feelings. That's an axiom. Nobody discusses it. And especially desire. What is desire? A deep impulse. Which comes from you can't say where. Which can't be controlled with a handle. Or a superficial impulse. A fantasy. A festoon of the foam on a wave. Which is born, which dies, without you ever really knowing why. Isn't that so? It comes, it goes. In fact, you can't control it. Sometimes, with Hortense, I wanted to, and then I could see that that night, it didn't mean anything to her in fact.

"I've got a headache. I'm tired."

I wouldn't have thought of being angry. It was quite natural. Desire isn't a question of goodwill, it isn't a question of logic. It happened to me too that I didn't want to. It isn't even a question of time. I wouldn't have thought of saying:

"Come on now, no nonsense, it's twenty-five past ten, we've got to go to bed."

And certainly not:

"Oh, no, not tonight, but tomorrow at thirty-two minutes past eight."

Isn't that so? It's the same for everyone, I imagine. I've known punctual people. I've never known any who'd got to the point of working out a timetable for that sort of thing. You can't control desire. FINE. Well, try to explain to me how it happened to me that with Rose she said 'the day after tomorrow, half-past six,' and that when the day after tomorrow came, at forty minutes after six, we made love. Well, I think that . . . Because, after all, can you control it even in advance? As in business. 'You'll deliver that to me on Friday. Is that definite? In the morning? The day after tomorrow I'll make love.' You'll tell me that Hortense and Rose weren't the same thing. Why not? Because I was deceiving Hortense? But I was deceiving Rose too. Because I slept with Hortense. With adultery, have you noticed already? It's rare that there

isn't a cuckold. Nearly always there are at least two of them: the husband AND the lover, the wife AND the mistress. Naturally. And if everyone consoles himself on his side, see how far that goes. And then if you put Hortense in Rose's place my reasoning still remains exact. If I'd been living with Rose, well, each time, every night, every Sunday, we'd have felt each other, no more decided about it than that, and we'd have asked each other, weighing up the pros and cons:

"Shall we?"

Or she would have said:

"Not to-night, Emile, I've got indigestion."

Or else I would have said:

"Actually, I'm sleepy."

In short, the question would have been asked each time. NOW, the question was never asked about my rendezvous. Half-past six? I said O.K. And at six-thirty, six-forty, six-fifty, desire was there. To order. Anticipated sometimes three days beforehand. And it's the same thing for everybody. I've done my little bit of research. When a man has a date with his mistress, nine times out of ten he makes love. At any time. To order, there isn't any other term, however.

I take another example. You want a certain woman. I don't even speak about love. I'm talking about a little want. It happens that the person in question wants it too. But things don't work out. Her husband, her children, or her housework, there's always something. You can't manage to be on your own. And then one day, at a certain moment, the opportunity presents itself, unexpected, ridiculous, coming at the worst possible time, you have pains in the back, she's got a temperature, the bed wobbles, there's thunder in the air. Never mind, the opportunity is there, you seize it. Don't you? Without hesitation. And desire is there. All ready. At your service. And why?



Now why? Because you've got no choice? But having no choice is restriction, it's AN ORDER. And desire comes rushing along to you. Desire obeys. Desire accedes to your wishes. But what about dogma then? Desire which apparently can't be controlled? A police officer comes and finds you, sticks you in a cell and says:

"Now, my friend, there's a nice little bit of goods in there. You'll do me the favour of. And make it snappy."

Would you make it snappy? I doubt it. In any case it wouldn't be very pleasant. Wouldn't you want to reply:

"Oh, just a minute, fathead. Just a minute, I don't make love to order."

Isn't it like that? Legitimate, in fact. And yet when this order comes to you not from a police officer but from destiny you accede to it. And desire accedes to you. Because what is opportunity? An order from destiny, no more. The commands of destiny. And desire obeys. I think there's something to think about there.

## CHAPTER 25

Then there was Hortense who had the baby. It's true I forgot to mention that she was pregnant. Perhaps because there too I had the impression that it didn't concern me. And that too had been another reason that chased me out of the house. Until you've lived with a pregnant woman you can't imagine how much room she takes up. That stomach that goes on growing. Sometimes when she was in a room, with her stomach, I had the impression that I couldn't get in, that I had to creep along next to the wall. Then she had the baby, needless to say. Without any fuss, I must add. It was a daughter, Marthe, named after her grandmother and godmother, Madame Masure. Another silly thing: what's the use of godmothers? Isn't it to replace the mother? Especially in the case of death. So what was the point in having the grandmother who normally should have died before Hortense? I pointed out the fact. I was treated like dirt. Had I no respect for anything?

Because it must be said also that at the time of this pregnancy there was a sort of reconciliation. I said, a sort of. Entry to the Masure flat was still denied me, but the Masures came to us when I was there, only the parents, it's true, and Elise too, who'd got married in the meantime. Not to her Raoul whom we saw in the preceding chapters. No. Something had happened. I don't know what. But as she was in the marrying mood she'd picked up someone else, a certain Janson, Joseph, who worked for the railway company.

Joseph was insignificant. Colourless. Looking like a rubber that's already been used a lot, as though his

shoulders were worn out. Making a collection of postage stamps, each stamp in a sachet, the sachet stuck on to the page and underneath written in pencil the value of the stamp, each time a year late because he bought the Yvert and Tellier catalogue at the end of the year at a reduced price, a thing that he pointed out.

"Twenty-two francs, you see. But it's certainly gone up since then."

And one great adventure in his life was that his father at one moment had thought of taking work in Constantinople. Then it didn't happen, but Joseph retained some pride about it. Every time that someone mentioned Constantinople.

"Ah yes," he would say, "Constantinople."

"Do you know it?"

Then, modestly, but sure of himself :

"I just missed being born there."

Then the anecdote about his dad. Since then he had taken an interest in Turkey. He read books about the country.

"Ataturk has done us a lot of harm," he said.

Looking like someone who suffered from corns.

Or else, with a zealous look :

"You know that you should say Istanbul now."

And before he died he would very much have liked to sleep with a Turkish girl. Just once.

"A Turkish girl, just imagine, Emile. Oh, it must be marvellous."

Only it never happened.

Concerning reconciliation I forgot to note at the right time and place that the quarrel, as far as Masure himself was concerned, hadn't lasted. Obviously, at the Ministry, where we were always in contact, it would have looked peculiar. The day after the handkerchief scene he came to me.

**“ All these old wives tails, well, you know, Emile . . . ”**

**But ashamed of himself in some way. His laugh was not very confident. Then, the next winter my sister Justine died. Of pneumonia.**

## CHAPTER 26

And time passed. It's a habit time has in fact and it won't be me who'll be trying to change it. In one sense it's consoling. You think you're doing nothing. But time passes. You don't gain anything but days follow days. You finish by having a whole heap of them and you feel less poor. You say I'm thirty, I'm sixty. I AM. Now, observe you could very easily have understood the thing differently at the beginning and worked it out that at each birthday, far from gaining a year, you merely lost it. Isn't that so? That's defensible as an idea. But we've chosen to say, I'm a year older, I'm thirty. As though it was something gained. As though it was property. I have a little daughter. I had my sister's funeral. Always I have or I had or I am. Our little treasures, in fact.

But for me all that, as I've already said, was like a dream. Like my share of sleep. Everyone passes a third of their life asleep. But do they recount their sleep? No. It's important all the same. A third of their life. One hour out of every three. And the fuss they make if you prevent them from sleeping. The money they spend on sleeping draughts. And yet they hardly ever talk about it. Why? Because they haven't anything to say. Hortense, the kid and the furniture was the same thing for me. It was my share of sleep. I try to talk about it. I tell myself that I ought to. If only to give an idea of it. To have some respect for perspective. But I can't manage it. I could talk about Rose for hours. The Ministry: *idem*. Just in describing my office, my little habits, my pens in front of me, the pot of glue on the left, the punch on the right. And the large size pencil sharpener, with handle, that I'd got

the whole office to buy, sharing out the cost. About other things which seem insignificant but which I remember all the same, and of which I could speak. Champion for example. Or the little maid that I'd petted in the inn on my honeymoon. When she talked she blew her hair up in the air because it fell down over her face all the time. She smelt warm, it was summer in any case, but when my hand touched her thigh it was cold all the same, cold like the wall of a cellar, not quite dry—and rough. I can remember that. I can talk about it. Whereas Hortense . . . I would come back home. I would find her there, often with her mother, near the fire, with the baby in her play-pen, clutching her feet. And I feeling like a fly. As useless as a fly. I was there and it seemed to me that I might also not have been there either. I would sit down. I would doze off. That's how it was, I dozed. With Rose, I lived. At the Ministry I lived. At home I dozed. I had a colleague for whom it was the other way round. At the office he went to sleep over his papers. Towards six o'clock he came to life again. He quivered. Like a fish that's on its way to the water again. You can definitely say that the world is varied.

It was then that I began to drift. How do you drift? Well, drifting, I think the word's obvious. Drift. Loaf, if you prefer. Wander. Wander about. Pace the pavement. Hang around. But why? For nothing. For pleasure. Why do you smoke a pipe? Why do you go to the café? To drink? But you could drink at home. It would even be cheaper for you. The truth is that you go to the café to escape a certain emptiness and to find a certain fullness. Isn't that the case? *Idem* for Magis Emile. I had Rose, but not very often, never more than twice a week, which was her idea. So, on the days without Rose, what was left to me? This flat which was a desert for me, where I went

to sit down beside a woman who didn't concern me? I preferred loafing about, wandering, making detours.

Until the day when I noticed that it gave me pleasure, when I noticed that it made my mouth water, as happened when I went to see Rose. The same. Exactly the same. The feeling, I would say of existing by losing myself in other things. By sinking down into an obscure seething world, into a world which at last had no reasons. The reason-less universe of Rose. The reason-less universe of the prowlers. BECAUSE THERE IS A WORLD OF PROWLERS.

Note that at the beginning I didn't realise it. Or rather I only had a presentiment, I only touched the edge, without daring to lean on it. I hadn't yet been quite cured of the system. And I said: Prowling? Pleasure in prowling? The same as with Rose? Who's ever heard of such a thing? Looking at the shops, yes. But I didn't look at the shops. To stretch your legs, yes. But I didn't care tuppence about my legs and I also prowl in the tube. To take the air. But if I'd wanted to take the air, I'd have gone to the Tuileries, to the Cours-la-Reine. But I went to the rue Cardinet, the rue Roi-de-Sicile, I went to the Boulevard de Clichy. So what? But then I noticed that I wasn't alone. That I wasn't the only one to prowl. And you don't even imagine how many people there are prowling in the streets, men and women. Because before you can notice them you must begin prowling yourself. Otherwise you don't see anything. It's like the system. As long as you're inside it you don't suspect anything. You COULDN'T suspect anything. You have your reasons. You search for those of other people. Then one day you discover that there aren't any reasons and another world appears, another universe whose existence, as long as one was in the system, you couldn't suspect. The same thing for prowling. The same thing for the streets. Half-way up, as though stretched between the lamp-posts, there

reigns the trellis, the trellis of reasons, incentives, excuses and the people who go on their way, suspended from it.

'I'm in the rue du Château-d'Eau. Why am I in the rue du Château-d'Eau? Because I must go to the Town Hall for the tenth *arrondissement*. Why am I in the rue Chapon? Because I'm going to the rue Beaubourg, where I have something to do.'

Fine.

And below, below the trellis, in the shadow, not suspended, not attached, free at last, those who prowl, those for whom the rue Chapon is not a means of communication but a place in itself, who go out of it not in order to get to the rue Beaubourg but for the one and only reason that the rue Chapon isn't very long and that you must in fact finish by going out of it. Those who seek—but without knowing what. And as they don't know what they're looking for, it has no more reason to be in any other street than in the rue Chapon. Am I inventing this? Ah! I repeat, if you want to know, you have to prowl yourself. If not, you only see the passers-by. But try it then. Try and abandon yourself to the street. Try to prowl. And then look. That elderly man who walks so rapidly, who looks so decided, all at once, with the gesture of someone distracted he retraces his steps. You tell yourself that he's forgotten something? But follow him. He hasn't forgotten anything. It's just simply that he's been overcome by an agony to leave this street which CERTAINLY contains what he is looking for. Which contains it all the more certainly because he still hasn't been able to define to himself what he is looking for. And that other man, looking nonchalant, who you could swear was marking time waiting for his girl friend. Look. Nobody comes to join him. He only looks. And there are hundreds like that. Hundreds. I who am talking to you, after having observed closely, I can tell you that in the streets of Paris



out of every four passers by, there's one who is walking to no purpose. Who goes on with no other reasons, no other aim except himself. One out of four who, if he was held in a police raid, wouldn't be able to answer if he was asked why on a certain day and a certain hour, he was going down the rue des Blancs-Manteaux. Or who would be forced to tell a lie. Truth ! Truth ! They make me laugh with their truth. A quarter of truth is under the trellis in the shadow, below the platform. Beneath logic. Beneath probability.

"But why the rue des Blancs-Manteaux?"

"No reason why."

"What were you looking for?"

"I don't know."

Of course that depends on the district. In the Place Vendôme, in the rue Jouffroy you'll find idlers, tourists and beggars. No prowlers. The important streets, wide and empty, the districts with big houses are no good for prowling. The streets which are too shut off, inhospitable, streets with reasons. Nothing more shut off than a reason. Look at men. Do they have a reason? Nothing else can come in. But talk to me about the big rivers like the Boulevard Sébastopol, talk to me about the narrow damp and crowded streets like the rue des Lombards, the rue Pernelle, the rue des Vertus. Or the alley-ways. Go into the alley-ways. Doors on the same level as the passers-by, windows the same height as men, shops like grottoes where EVERYTHING BECOMES POSSIBLE.

Because, in the end, what is a prowler? Perhaps it isn't so easy to say, but I think that the prowler is someone who, for one reason or another, finds himself frustrated over life and tries to take it from someone else. Because other people exist. They live. They move. They foam. And then, slipping in between them, dragging yourself along beside them, letting yourself go like an open shop-

ping bag, in the end you take a little of their existence from them. A little word. A look. A phrase. Like a lamp that you connect, if only for a moment, with an electric plug. A little light. That can be anything you like. The old twirp who sees a young scamp kiss a girl and who looks at you, who takes you as a witness, with the air of saying, oh well, young things, just look. AND YOU COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER. The lamp which lights up. Solitude broken. A little wave which for a moment broke against you. All the men who flow along the street, each one with his prison around him. Each one shut in. Then, for a moment, a sky-light opens. A little sign. A word. A little solidarity. A little love in fact. A man who drops his pencil. Someone picks it up for him. Not even that : They make a sign to him.

“Here ! Your pencil.”

“Ah, thank you, that’s kind of you.”

And you penetrate into his life. You exist. You weigh things up. If only for a moment. Without counting the fact that the moment sometimes gets lengthened.

“How lucky that you were there. I was just going to need it.” I would have been in a spot.”

Confessions, straightaway.

“I’m an inspector.”

Confidence.

“At the market.”

You can’t imagine how much confidence is available along the streets. Confidence which asks only to come out of itself. In the evening especially. At dusk. Between the lion and the lamb. As though men were afraid. Afraid of the lion. Afraid of the lamb. Then they talk. To anybody. And the prowler picks them up.

“Awful weather.”

“It is.”

“But when I was at Tourcoing in 1909 . . .”

Or worried, careful people. Who ask to be reassured.

"Excuse me sir, do you think they really collect from this letter-box sometimes?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Because it's a letter for my daughter. I wouldn't want . . . She's expecting a baby. In the Nièvre district."

Downtrodden people taking their revenge.

"So I told him what I thought about it. And without mincing my words, I can tell you. Monsieur Trumeau, I told him, do you think there was any plumbing in the trenches? And he soon shut up after that."

And dreams. Everything that carries with it dreams, cherished lies and boasts. The things that you daren't tell the neighbours because they'd know it wasn't true, and you tell it afterwards on a bench in a square to an unknown person whom you'll never see again. One day there is an old man carrying a basket with vegetables sticking out of it. He talked to me for twenty minutes, about prices. Then all at once, with a pretence at clicking his heels, and his eyes remote :

"Allow me to introduce myself. Count de Rabutin-Beaufort, of the hussars of the guard."

His universe. His planet where, for one moment, for once, he gave himself the pleasure of taking someone.

Or a little girl, one evening, not yet sixteen, with her nose in the air :

"I know what men are like. Just think, I've already had four of them. Why are you laughing? At the moment it's a pianist. An artist. But sensitive."

Her hand up to her cheek.

"Just think, when we make love, he doesn't want me to breathe. That upsets him."

"So then what?"

"So, I hold my breath."

With pride. In a true French way.

Another one, a squat man, but very small, who gesticulated:

"When I was fourteen, sir, I was a cabin boy. On a Greek cargo boat. You see how it was. Because the Greeks are all pansies, everyone knows that, it's very well known. So the cabin boy . . . I had them wild, you know. Especially because at that age they found me very attractive. They sent me backwards and forwards between themselves. From morning till night. I was pierced through and through. A real Saint Sebastian."

Dreams. Dreams like smoke trailing along the houses. And finally I discovered what I had only sensed in the rue Montorgueil: THAT THERE IS ANOTHER LIFE UNDERNEATH LIFE. Beneath the platform. Beneath the trellis. Beneath reason. A deep obscure life which you can sink into. Within reach of everybody. On the pavement. You feel you're alone, but the street is full, full of empty people, people who search, who wait. Who search for you, who wait for YOU. Ready to follow you. For whom neither day nor night have any shape and they can let anything come into it. If I'd still had my little room, well, I could have brought someone home every night. Every night. Women ad lib. To sleep with? Well, yes, to sleep with as well. You must sleep with them, to push back those walls which never stop closing in on us. But especially to give each other mutually a little existence. Pushed like me by this soft yet strong impulse. Or men who would have talked all night. Who would have let their life, their lies and their truths rise up about them like a mist. Who would have let their souls wash against mine a little. With their words coming from the most obscure parts of themselves and on which I could have nourished myself, fed myself. Instead of which . . . At eight o'clock, I had to tear myself away, and go home. And what would I find there? My chair. My serviette ring. Hortense. Emptiness. Clouds. Vagueness.

## CHAPTER 27

One day like this, on the Boulevard du Temple, I was thinking about nothing. I let myself be carried along. At the moment when I was going to cross over, as there was a lot of traffic, I stopped. There was a woman beside me saying no, no, with her head. As though I had asked her something. No, no. But nicely, with an indulgent look. I looked at her. She wasn't at all young any more. Small, with a red nose—or rather with red veins.

We crossed over. When we got to the other side:

“No, no,” she said. “You're wasting your time, sir.”

I didn't know what to say.

“Did you think that I didn't see you then?”

With a nice little understanding smile.

“That's the second time that you've followed me.”

I?

“Oh, I've noticed it. A woman always notices these things.”

She had a natural way of talking and even, I would say, a certain nobility in her manner. She was wearing a little black jacket with a collar of I don't know what and a shopping bag like Hortense had, in black string with curtain rings.

“I'm used to it, you know.”

I said no more. We were walking along beside each other.

“The butcher too, just now. He said, ‘Ah, there's Madame Loubès. I've kept you a bit of something really tender, Madame Loubès.’ That was obvious, wasn't it? I certainly saw the look his wife gave him.”

Someone on the pavement had just said "hullo" to her. She replied, lowering her eyes.

"It's my concierge. Him too . . . ."

She nodded.

"Poor boy. He must suffer a lot. To see me like that, every day. And without hope."

"I'm sure he does."

I didn't understand a thing. But she went on.

"And I can't, you see. I belong to my husband."

"Your husband?"

"He deserted me. Three years ago now. But he'll come back."

Definite.

"It must be some young thing who's seduced him. It isn't his fault. But one day he'll understand."

Coyly, turning towards me, blushing just a little bit.

"I can't prevent you from hoping, but you can see how it is."

She stopped.

"Here I am back home."

I went on my way. So surprised that I talked to myself about it.

"Well, she's a fine one, I must say."

People who talk to themselves get laughed at. Why? They can talk to other people all right.

But within a week I came back to this Loubès woman. Without any very definite reason. The ox in my back. Pushing me along. There was a woman: I went to her. Like water to a river.

"Madame Loubès?"

I'd hesitated a little. I said to myself—that story about the concierge, after all, who can tell. But the concierge hadn't even looked up.

"The second floor, the door on the right."

I rang the bell. She came and opened it.

“ You ? ”

Then, with the air of a connoisseur:

“ Ha ! You’re bold enough, aren’t you.”

Along a narrow passage, where our bodies touched, briefly.

“ Can I trust you ? ”

I played the simpleton. We sat down. Chatted. It was nice with her. In the Arab style, vaguely.

“ And did the concierge let you come up ? ”

“ Of course.”

“ You must have pulled a fast one. Very fast. Yes, I can see that all right. He often stops people coming up, that concierge. I have my suspicions. Jealous, don’t you think ? ”

More chatting and gossiping. Then abruptly :

“ You must go now.”

“ You going to be busy ? ”

“ It’s not that.”

Anxiously, one hand on top of the other, the fingers of one hand moving in and out between the fingers of the other.

“ But it’s dangerous. There are moments . . . ”

A sigh.

“ Can I always be my own mistress ? ”

A question, like any other.

“ Go now.”

Fair enough, I went. I’ve already let it be seen, I’m all anyone wants me to be, except contrary. Oh ! and then hell ! I’d forgotten my hat. I went back up.

“ You’ve come back ? ”

“ For my hat.”

And I stabbed jerkily with my finger, pointing to it, lying on one of the bits of furniture.

“ My hat.”

She didn't seem to understand me. She looked at me, her jaw dropping.

"Your hat?"

Well, what else? I couldn't have forgotten my trousers, could I? A few days later, I went back there again.

"You? Great big fool."

Me? We sat down.

"It seems daft to you, doesn't it, senseless, for a woman to wait for her husband like this?"

"Oh, I've seen plenty of others," I said, politely.

"But he'll come back to me."

She was looking into the far distance.

"One day, he'll come in. Through that door."

Damn it, there wasn't any other.

"I'll be here. Sitting like I am now. He'll fall onto his knees."

"Of course," I said.

"He'll lay his head in my lap."

My God . . . Well, then, my God! I stood up. She looked in my direction at last. And then I knelt down. I'm not inventing anything. And I laid my head in her lap. What for? FOR NOTHING. Perhaps because it was the only way of coming out of the nothingness into which her visions had plunged me. Or else to see what would happen.

"You?"

Her hands on my hair. Her knees, trembling. Her skirt, smelling of soup. Not stew, no, an honest to God smell of soup. Not at all disagreeable. In the smell of soup there is infinite peace.

I went back there again, from time to time.

"You don't realise," she said. "It's the grocer now."

This woman and her mania.

"Careful, now. I shall get jealous."

"Great big fool!"



That was her expression.

"And he used to bring me flowers."

The next time, I brought her some violets.

"You shouldn't drink so much," she said.

Me, who never drank. But it's true enough from what she told me, he often knocked it back, her old man.

"You ought to be careful of Madame Rollan."

What Madame Rollan ?

"I've got eyes in my head, she's always dancing round you. A woman always notices that kind of thing."

Sometimes I said to myself: it's not possible, I'm with Joan of Arc. BUT IT INTERESTED ME. Also we ended up sometimes by getting into bed. But not often. With Rose twice a week, and Hortense on and off, I wasn't all that bothered. Mostly it was my head in her lap or adjacent niceties. And I went on going there. An *affaire*, people would say. That's another of those words which muddle everything. An *affaire* ? When I only saw her now and again, this Madame Loubès, twice a month perhaps. Or not that even. But every time she greeted me as if I'd only left the night before.

"Great big fool !"

And so that also became a planet, an egg, a world, a universe, the little Arab room where, in silence, things, THINGS, came about.

## CHAPTER 28

Without counting the fact that in the end it happened to me also that I sometimes went with prostitutes. It is, I think, a detail of no importance, and I only mention it for the sake of completeness. For a long time, as I said, I didn't think of them, the prostitutes that is. Why ? Go and find out. Things are like that. Brothels, for example. Even now, at my age, I've never been into a brothel. Does that make you laugh ? The system. There are CROWDS of men who have never set foot in a brothel. But it's true. I've asked them. And you yourself perhaps, who, carried away by the system, were all ready to laugh. Well, first of all, have you ever set foot in a cinema studio ? A fortune teller's ? No ? Now then, it's not any more curious than never having been in a knocking-shop. Not any more strange. Have you ever had anything to do with a truss-manufacturer ? With an ichtyologist ? Then why must you NECESSARILY have had anything to do with prostitutes ? That's the world for you, all right. Bleating away all the time. Without stopping to think.

I thought about them again, not so long ago, listening to Monsieur Raffard. He'd been to the theatre. By himself. His wife wasn't well.

'I came back along the boulevard,' he was telling me. 'Well ! Believe me or not as you like, old man, it wasn't once, it wasn't twice, it was ten times. TEN times I was accosted.'

And cocky about it. It's lunacy with men, sheer lunacy, what they can feed their vanity on. Let a street-walker, who hasn't even looked to see if they're knock-kneed or club-footed, accost them, them rather than the next man,

and their heads start swelling already. Now it isn't even true. It's the system again. Or rather perhaps it was true that he had been accosted, old Raffard, but he forgot to add that he'd done his best to invite it. Just think, on the one occasion when he was without his wife, he would have liked to cut a caper. Because I, who am speaking to you, for years and years I was never accosted. Or only once or twice, without conviction. Then one day, they began to say things to me. To invite me. Yes. But why? Because I'd begun to prowl. There's a professional instinct. So then, with these women, from ten yards away, it tells them that you're a prowler. A vacant man in fact. Who is there, in that street, without an aim, without a reason and who therefore could be made to stop. The prospective client. But otherwise? Nothing at all. Try it out for yourself. Go right through my part of the world. It hasn't got a good reputation by any means. But go through it without dawdling, without letting your eyes wander, with a definite aim. No one will accost you. Or only once, half-heartedly. They won't take you by assault, don't worry. I tell you, and you can take my word for it, prostitutes, nine times out of ten, only accost those who want it. Not the others.

Only what I have also discovered is that there are men—and more than you'd think—who find their pleasure in being accosted, being brushed against, even in being invited up, when they have firmly decided not to take things any further. It gives them a little thrill. Which has its attraction. A little impression of liberty. A little vanity. Or something even more disturbing. Without counting the pleasure of refusing. I know this because myself as well, I've had it, that little thrill. In the beginning. I don't know what it was kept me from following them, these women, but just the fact of being invited was enough to give me pleasure. A pleasure that I sought. I walked

slowly. I went along the streets known for. What's more, they know only too well that it exists. It gives them plenty to grumble about.

"The dirty swine," one of them told me one day. "The types who want to, but won't go with you, there's nothing dirtier. To begin with, let me tell you, these here types, they SMELL BAD."

That's the only remark at all unusual that I have to mention from my experiences in this field. Otherwise, they're stupid, that kind of woman. True enough, for twenty or thirty francs, you can't expect philosophy from them as well. Then why did I end up by going with them ? Simply because I was on the prowl. I point this out for those who are interested in the thing, the taste for prowling, it's rare that it doesn't end by putting you in touch with the prostitutes. Firstly, because they think of it, themselves. One reason already. And above all, because the man on the prowl, he never sets off without a hope which can't always be frustrated. The hours, the hours he hangs about sometimes in order to find a welcome glance, a human word. Then he must have it at all costs, a word or two, even if it's simply: 'Can't you manage another ten francs, you bloody miser.'

Sentimental in a way.

Or perhaps something else even, something more obscure, that I haven't the time to seek out. I must get to the tragedy. I've dawdled too much already. But have you ever thought how sad they would be, the streets, at night, without these nice little women who walk them ?

## CHAPTER 29

When this Dugommier man first began to hang around my apartment, did I have any suspicions ? No. Did I trust him then ? Or Hortense ? No more so. The truth is that for a long time I'd never asked myself such a question. If I had considered it, I know quite well what I would have replied. A fellow's been to see my wife ? A friend from childhood days ? Who came a lot ? Sometimes in my absence ? Had it happened to someone else I'd have laughed all night long at his credulity. Only it was happening to me, and I didn't think anything of it. Because there are things that you don't think of. And also perhaps because it didn't interest me very much. And finally perhaps because I didn't see Hortense in the part at all, because I'd never found that sort of inclination in her.

Then one day :

"Guess who came to see me," she asked me. "Victor. Victor Dugommier."

"And who might he be, Dugommier ?"

"But he's the son of Madame Dugommier. You know perfectly well. They used to be our neighbours. Then he went to Indo-China."

"Ha ! ha ! rather yellow, I bet."

"What do you mean, yellow ?"

"Well, the chaps that go to Indo-China, they come back like daffodils, everyone knows that."

"He's not a bit like a daffodil."

Good. What I was saying . . .

"He would be delighted to make your acquaintance."

It's from phrases like that, I don't know why exactly, that I felt that Hortense lived in her world, and I in mine.

And, between us, a cloud of darkness.

“ He’s coming to lunch tomorrow.”

Bony, this Dugommier. That’s what stood out most. Plenty of bones. And big, you realised. Big cheeks. A large nose. A long chin. A face jutting out like the corner of a wall. And what a talker, telling his little stories. Life out there. Travel. How it opens up the so-called mind. The boat. Then it was he who invited us to a restaurant.

“ A little restaurant that I’ve discovered.”

Because people of the Dugommier variety, they never enter a restaurant, they DISCOVER a restaurant. He had a touch of Gustave too, this Dugommier.

“ Mine host ! ”

And they always know mine host. Who, for his part, couldn’t care less.

Then he came to lunch again. Then he came one evening. Then one Sunday. In short, bosom pals. Moreover, without wasting much of my time over it, I soon realised that once upon a time he must have cherished some affection for Hortense. And might well have married her even. But his father who had died without leaving anything, his poor mother, his sister. . .

“ A mother and a sister,” I said. “ See now, just the same as me. Quite a coincidence, eh ? ”

“ Yes,” he said.

But as if to say that his mother and mine weren’t at all the same thing. Pretty proud, I can tell you.

So then, for his mother and sister, off he went to Indo-China, very gallant, with the implication that he was the head of the family. Who realised his duties, his responsibilities.

“ But, when I saw the coast of France fading in the distance. . . ”

Except for the fact that he left from Genoa. The system. That fellow was in the system up to his eyebrows.

"I thought of all that I was leaving behind me. . ."

And he looked at Hortense. And she looked at him. Each of them asking themselves a question, I suppose. Wondering if they wouldn't have done better to have waited.

". . . Of all that I couldn't be certain of seeing again. . ."

Then they looked at me. Me. Making comparisons, probably. Making bitter reflections to themselves. Regrets. Oh ! That was obvious. Their eyes were full of it. So then, I amused myself by taking the piss out of them.

"Speaking for myself," said Dugommier, "I like my furniture in wood."

"A matter of taste," I said. "Personally, I prefer mine indoors. Ha ! ha ! ha !"

That shook them, both of them with their nostalgic dreams. Or else :

"And what's the crumpet like out there, Monsieur Dugommier ? You must have tasted it, I'm sure."

He wriggled a bit. I pressed him.

"Aren't they rather sweaty, those yellow women ?"

Or else, something which made him suffer terribly, the of-the-earth earthy type. I affected it.

"Bloody 'ell, I can't find me bastard pipe. My little old pipe."

He had a sickly smile on his face.

"Now don't fart around, Monsieur Victor, a little old pipe means more to me than any of your women."

He couldn't take it any more.

"Just call me Victor, at least."

"Oh ! I couldn't do that, Monsieur Victor."

Sometimes he couldn't prevent himself from raising his eyes to the ceiling. With a sigh. And it must have been painful for him, I can well imagine. All the more so, since Hortense thought to put things right by smiling amiably at my chatter and saying:

"He's got a laugh and a joke for everything, my husband. You can see that, can't you, Victor ?"

And he smiled painfully. Liked a squeezed lemon (obviously Indo-China). Oh ! had I been a brute, a woman-chaser, a drunkard, that would certainly have suited him better. Because the brutal husband, the womanising husband, he figures in the system. But there was I making myself out to be a plain Joe Soap. And he suffered. Visibly. Up the creek, rather. Not knowing what leg to stand on.

But with all that, I repeat, at first I hadn't dreamt that they could deceive me. Was I stupid ? I've never pretended to be any cleverer than the next man. What's more, I had rather a soft spot for old Dugommier. I appreciated his little stories. I teased him, but I felt pleased when he arrived. All the more so since he brought some sweets every time. For the kid. But I ate three quarters of them. That stupefied him. One day, Hortense :

"What I like best of all is marrons glacés."

Next Sunday, he came along with a bagful. A small bag. He was economical. Hortense was out.

"Ah ! Marrons glacés !"

And I dug in. When Hortense came back :

"You owe me a good ticking-off, my sweet. I've wolfed the lot. But Monsieur Victor will bring you some more, won't you, Monsieur Victor !"

So I had my amusements. Undoubtedly, that's what prevented me from paying more attention. But Rose set me thinking. I had told her about Dugommier's visits and my clowning. Then one day, not that it was of any interest



to her, but rather, I think, out of politeness, she asked me :

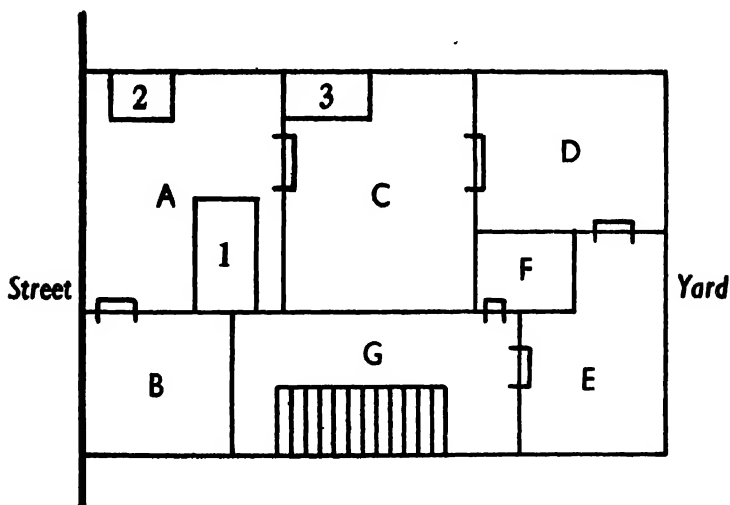
“ And Hortense ? Does she still sleep with her Dugommywhatsit ? ”

“ Sleep with him ? Certainly not.”

“ Doesn't she ? Why not ? ”

Always simple, Rose. Then I said to myself. . . After all . . . In short, the next day, on the dot of three, I asked for leave from the Ministry. I came back on tip-toe. Here I must tell you that our apartment was in an old house, which had not been built for that, with the result that instead of being reached by a single door, it had several which opened onto a long landing at the head of the stairs. Anyhow, to make it clear what followed, it will be useful perhaps to give you a plan.

PLAN OF THE APARTMENT IN THE RUE DE PROVENCE.



- A. bedroom
- B. spare room.
- C. dining-room.
- D. "lounge" (Masure fashion)
- E. kitchen.
- F. lavatory
- G. staircase and landing
- 1 the conjugal bed.
- 2. wardrobe with mirror.
- 3. the child's bed.

So, I came back. Smack, bang on ! He was there, old Dugommier. His hat was on the stand on the landing, a hat just like him, pearl-grey, brand new, with a dashing brim. I ran full speed, and by way of the spare room listened at the door of the bedroom. Nothing. They weren't in there. To the dining-room door. Which was ajar. I squeezed through into the dining-room. When the doors are closed, seeing that it hasn't any windows, it's dark in there. Marthe was having her afternoon sleep. I listened at the door of the 'lounge.' There they were. But chatting peacefully.

"My mother is not getting along so well as she was," said Dugommier.

"It's age," replied Hortense, "Mother has the same trouble."

"Your mother's as firm as a rock."

Nothing. All this bother for nothing. I left. I took advantage of this unforeseen leave to go to the rue du Cygne for a nice bit of skirt I'd located. Only she wasn't there. Then I strolled around.

Nothing then. But one fact at least; Dugommier was in my home. It might have been a coincidence (Hortense had made no secret of the fact that he sometimes came in the afternoon) but it might also be that he often came.

Mightn't it ? I had to keep my eyes open.

Ten or twelve days later, I asked Hortense :

"Are you going out this afternoon ?"

"No."

At three o'clock I came back. The spare room, the door of the bedroom. Hell, they were in there. I heard them talking. I crouched at the keyhole: they were undressing. Christ ! there was no doubt about it. Or rather, I imagined that Hortense was undressing for, in fact, through my keyhole, I could only see Dugommier. Who was acting very deliberately. As in his own home. His coat on the back of a chair, his trousers on top, IN THEIR CREASES; his keys, his wallet on the mantelpiece. No more hurried than that. And passion ? Doesn't that exist then, passion ? I ought perhaps to have intervened. To tell the truth, the idea never occurred to me. And then the sight interested me. Hortense had come into my field of vision. She was naked. She embraced Dugommier, pressing up against him. Well, well ! You can't imagine how curious—and interesting—it is, to see, repeated for someone else, motions that have already been performed for you. I thought I knew her, Hortense. Now, seeing her there with her Dugommier, I realised that I hardly knew her at all. Obviously. When she kissed me, I saw what ? Her face, her shoulder. Not her back. Not the creases behind her knees. Now a back is alive. A crease behind the knee exists. It has its own expression.

So it interested me. And, at the same time, I had the impression that it didn't concern me. It was a spectacle, that's all. A spectacle which, clearly, was not meant for me, and which therefore, in one sense, didn't concern me. All the more so, since I could hardly see them properly. Luckily the door was an old type, and the keyhole as big as my eye. But the bed—if you refer to the plan—was placed on the same side as my door and now that they had

passed on to the horizontal phase of the thing, I could only see them rather indirectly thanks to the mirror in the wardrobe. Pretty poorly therefore. Fragmentarily. Without counting the fact that in true middle-class style they had burrowed under the blankets. (UNDER the blankets: and people talk about passion !) Often I had to be content with guessing. But I waited. Patiently. I had got myself a stool. They talked a lot as well. I thought I understood that this was the second time they'd gone to bed. The second time ! And Dugommier had been coming to the house now for six months. It was Rose who was going to get the biggest laugh when I told her about it. The biggest laugh, no : she'd have that indulgent, amused expression. She who. In fact.

## CHAPTER 30

So this spectacle wasn't destined for me. O.K. It didn't concern me. O.K. But it interested me, that's the point. I was able to surprise her two or three times more. It must be said too that as far as guile was concerned neither of them was very bright. The first time that I saw Dugommier again, during a visit, naturally,

"In fact, Monsier Victor," I said, "at your Export Corporation it's nine to twelve, two to six every day. Office life, in fact. Like me."

"Oh, not at all."

He was hurt. Office life. Just a minute. Because he aspired somewhat to the merchant adventurer type. The right sort of adventurer, of course. A captain of industry.

"Not at all. It's quite different. It depends on what there is to do. Sometimes I stay until eight or nine o'clock."

"So they exploit you?"

Dugommier was irritated.

"You know, Emile, the man who'll exploit me isn't yet born. I've arranged things nicely. I have the afternoon free on Tuesday and Friday."

Tuesday and Friday? I made a note of that.

And Hortense wasn't any better.

"Are you going out this afternoon? Are you going to see your mother?"

She said yes or no. Without even thinking of lying. After the first time I surprised them, the same evening, I moved the wardrobe with the mirror. Hortense couldn't understand it.

"But why? It's been there three years."

"Exactly. This'll make a change. Come on, come and help me. One, two, three. Up!"

AND SHE HELPED ME.

Then I made advances to her. She didn't want it.

"I'm tired, Emile. I'm sleepy."

But I insisted. Perhaps she didn't want her memory spoiled.

"And these blankets."

I threw them back.

"But Emile, it's cold."

"Real lovers do it without blankets."

The next time, on Tuesday, with Dugommier, she threw the blankets back too. And I on my stool. Behind the door. That was the time too when I almost cried out. Because of the wardrobe precisely. It was my old wardrobe from the rue de Borrégo. It was old and the door wasn't steady. In order to keep it shut we had to put a little bit of folded paper in it. The paper must have fallen out or something. In short, in the middle of my contemplation the door swung open. The wardrobe door, that is. Slowly. You just can't imagine it. The mirror which moved, sweeping through the whole room, raking it over, showing me their two bodies which moved slowly, as though borne on a wave, which seemed to move towards me, which did come towards me, like an old dream returning. Ah, I can tell you that it was something of a sensation. A brilliant, light, sickly-sweet sensation, too beautiful even because I remember that it was after this episode, after the sort of joy that it gave me that the spectacle, instead of continuing to interest me, began to give me a feeling of distress.

Distress, precisely. Because in the end this spectacle didn't concern me. O.K. BUT WHY DIDN'T IT CONCERN ME ? Yes, why ? What right had those two to go walking into valleys where they didn't take me ? Dugommier came on Sunday. He was there in the living room. With Hortense. With Marthe who was playing. With me. I was between them. I was mingled with them. Each of

us had our part of existence and each one contributed to the existence of the other. Hortense pouring us out a cup of coffee. Dugommier talking about his life out there. I eating his sweets. And between us, the little human wave. Between us, love. I don't speak of the stupid Hortense-Dugommier love. I speak of this other love between us, between the four of us, which consisted just as much of Hortense's cup of coffee as of the pleasure I had in pestering Dugommier. Isn't that so? And then Tuesday and Friday, Marthe in her little bed, I on my stool (or worse still, I who was supposed to be somewhere else), the two of them set to work to get hold of all the available pieces of existence. Everything. All the life of the apartment, all the life of the four of us together assumed by the two of them. Everything brought together in them. Their two bodies joined together, one in the other, like an egg again. A new egg on my path. Smooth. Closed in by their two backs. But what right had they got? Through what privilege? Was it honest? Was it fair? Wasn't I married? When you get married it's so that you won't be alone any more. So it seems to me. So there, on my stool, IN THE SPARE ROOM, I was alone. More lonely than a louse. More lonely than a cockchafer. More lonely and gifted with even less existence. Hortense was useful for something (something silly and not beautiful, but something). Dugommier *idem*—including the parenthesis. I, on my own, was no good for anything. Nothing. If I hadn't been there everything would have been the same. So being married was nothing then?

Note that when I say: curiosity and then distress, it's exact in one sense. Because there was first of all curiosity and then distress. But the curiosity didn't disappear all the same. It came back. Increased. It was often the stronger of the two. They alternated I would say. Or they mingled. But neither of the two feelings gave me any

desire to intervene. It was really for no reason at all, and almost without thinking about it that one day, as I left the Ministry about three o'clock, for the usual spectacle . . . I should make it clear at this point that things had worked out quite well at the Ministry, since I had a tooth that hurt me and the dentist had signed a certificate showing that I needed a whole course of treatment. So, at about three o'clock, I would say to my colleagues:

"O.K. I'm off to the dentist's."

I reached the flat. I got onto the stool. And I only went to the dentist's at about five. Perhaps that explains too why I was so sleepy during this episode. It really did hurt—my tooth, that is—and the dentist had given me a drug with opium in it. Obviously it put me in a daze. Once, even, behind the door, with my head leaning against the laundry basket, I even began to doze off. Curious ? Why ? THEY DOZED OFF SOMETIMES. Sometimes.

So, that day, as I was saying, it was really without thinking of anything very special that I called on my sister-in-law, Elise, the one who was married. I just wanted to talk to someone, I think that was all. To confide.

"Emile !"

She was a bit embarrassed. I hadn't got a very good name among my in-laws. And her husband wasn't there. It's wonderful in Paris, husbands are never there at three o'clock.

I said to her,

"There's something very serious happening to me."

I explained. She couldn't believe her ears. I said to her, "Come with me."

O.K. We left. We arrived on my landing. Dugommier's hat was there, on the hall-stand (You wouldn't believe it: a hat doesn't look anything special. And beneath it is: ADULTERY). Silently, I pointed it out to Elise. She nodded, seriously, with little movements of



her chin. I took her into the spare room. I looked through the key-hole. We had arrived at the vital moment. I made a sign to her to look in turn. She bent down. I thought that she'd stand up again straightaway. Not a bit of it. I suppose that she wanted to form an opinion. She didn't move. I began to get fed up. Naturally. In that spare room. Standing up. And Elise, beside me, bending down, with her behind taut and round in a check skirt. Well, in the end, my goodness, I touched it. Why not ? The behind was there. Oh, just a little caress, nothing very much. A gesture of solidarity rather. She tried to repulse me. With little movements of her behind at first. As though I was a fly. Then with her hand. But without standing up. And rather feebly. Soon giving up. And in any case was there anything to get excited about ? Was it anything more than a fly ? I did that as I would have done anything. Through anxiety in a way. To make myself concentrate.

Because, with the other two in the bedroom and Elise watching, THERE WASN'T ANYTHING ELSE FOR ME TO DO IN FACT. In that silence especially. So that I wouldn't get lost. So that I wouldn't let my attention wander.

Eventually Elise got up again. She nodded her head again in the direction of the door. We left. Still on tiptoe. Then she came to have a drink with me in a café.

“ What are you going to do ? ”

“ I don't know.”

It had all at once occurred to me that what I'd done, bringing Elise, that is, wasn't as stupid as all that. Since, if after that anyone discovered Rose, the Masures couldn't say anything.

“ And could you really see that without rushing in ? ”

“ The fact is that I love Hortense.”

“ Do you want me to speak to her ? ”

“ No, no. Definitely not.”

I put on an idiotic expression.

“ You see, I feel she’ll come back to me.”

She looked at me again. Then she smiled. She had a nice face, Elise. A bit red, like her sister, but a cheeky little nose.

“ Well, you certainly didn’t take long to console yourself.”

For a moment I thought that she’d heard something about Rose, but not at all. She was just thinking about her behind, and about the little gesture that I’d made. The vanity people have is really amazing. Because I’d touched ten centimetres of her skirt I was supposed to have consoled myself already. Unbelievable. As though there was nothing in the world except that : HER BEHIND.

## CHAPTER 31

The thing that began to annoy me was the stupid look they both began to have. They looked happy. Satisfied. I even think that Hortense began to put on weight. Her complexion improved. On Tuesdays and Fridays, when I came home in the evening, I would find her playing with the baby, humming a song. I teased her a bit, but without much result. Fortunately Dugommier was more sensitive. For obviously he continued to come when I was there. In the evening or on Sunday. Or he even came to lunch. Eating at my table. It was damn cheek, when you think of it. From time to time he looked at Hortense. With a heavy concentrated look. And a silly one. Or with the look of a good husband satisfied with his fate. That annoyed me, obviously. You only have to put yourself in my place. Then I would speak.

“ You should get married, Monsieur Victor. It’s no life otherwise. Last night, when we went to bye-byes, I talked to Hortense about it.”

“ It’s too kind of you, Emile.”

He looked furious.

“ Now look, me for example. Every night, when I go to bed, what do I find in my bed ? A nice little wife like Hortense. Don’t you think that’s very nice ? ”

“ Oh, I’m sure it must be.”

“ If you aren’t married, what are you ? Nothing much. And you go to see tarts. In some filthy joint. Where you get diseases.”

Hortense was beginning to look at her Dugommier anxiously. But he objected.

“ Not a bit of it. Tarts aren’t in my line.”

"What do you do then ? Perhaps you don't like women. There are men like that, I believe, who don't need them."

"My dear Emile, you're getting indiscreet."

"Emile," said Hortense.

"So what ? we're all friends together. And then you know, I've guessed what it's all about, Monsieur Victor. Oh, yes, I've guessed !"

I took my time. I lit my pipe again. I left a blank.

"My little old pipe."

"What have you guessed, my dear Emile ?"

Blasted Dugommier. He couldn't even manage to stop his voice from trembling.

"Well, apparently, once you've touched coloured women, the others don't interest you any more. Is that true ?"

"I've never touched any coloured women."

"Haven't you ? Perhaps the smell puts you off ?"

But all that. . . It upset them, certainly. But they still had their afternoons. I should have upset those.

Now, one afternoon, precisely, I was there, at my keyhole. They were in bed but they didn't move. It was the entr'acte, as you might say. Automatically I looked round the room. I saw Dugommier's wallet on the mantelpiece. As I said before, the bastard got undressed as though he was at home. Methodically. And as he did at home, I suppose, he had put his wallet on the mantelpiece. Then I had an idea. I got up. I touched the latch. I still hesitated a moment. *I went in.* There was a sort of mouse-like squeak. From Hortense. Then nothing more. Silence. They were there, both of them, the blanket half way over them. Dugommier with one arm under Hortense. They both looked at me. Without a word.

"Bravo, bravo," I said.

And I applauded silently, with my finger-tips.

"Congratulations, Hortense. You do it a bit better every time."

I went towards the mantelpiece. I took the wallet.

"Uh !"

Dugommier emitted an indistinct sound.

"What, Monsieur Victor ?" I said. "You must realise that my modest salary doesn't guarantee us the comfort which Hortense and I demand. This is a little tax."

I put the wallet in my pocket.

"But it's all my salary for the month," he shouted.

"That's exactly why Hortense advised me to wait, Monsieur Victor."

To be quite truthful I hadn't thought of that but it came at a good moment.

"Hortense ?" he said.

Poor chap ! For a moment I was sorry for him. He tried to get up, but Hortense clung to him, automatically, I suppose. Knowing her, she couldn't have understood a thing yet.

"But you're . . ."

And he looked at Hortense.

"Ah, Monsieur Victor, you surprise us very much. Frankly, you're the first to make a fuss. Good heavens, do you think that five afternoons with Hortense, five afternoons that I left you completely to yourselves, aren't worth a month's salary ?"

Then there was a sort of bellow. Hortense still held him back. He repulsed her brutally. He threw back the blanket. I beat it, as you can imagine. I shouted again, from the door :

"Stay if you want. Take your time. If there are any personal papers I'll send them back by post."

And I dashed down the stairs.

I hoped still that I'd pass a good moment in the café where I installed myself to look through the wallet. I was rather disappointed. Not from the money point of view, no. As he'd said, there was all his salary for the month. Three thousand two hundred francs. I'd have thought that he earned more, come to that. From the way he behaved and talked. But as far as his personal papers went, it was practically a dead loss. A few letters without any interest. A few photographs of women. Souvenirs, obviously. Or his sister that he talked about so much. I sent them back to him, after drawing moustaches on them. In purple ink. Because I was happy. I felt happy. I wanted to play jokes. I laughed on my own. And then I was pleased with myself. I felt I'd emerged from my little scene with a *brio* and an elegance which surprised even me. Generally I'm not so eloquent. And there, in the bedroom, the words had come to me all on their own. As though I was drunk. But drunk in a light, cheerful and pleasant way.

After that I went to the dentist's. Then I went to see Rose—it was her day. As for the three thousand two hundred francs, what with the thirty francs for the hotel with Rose, sixty when it was a pro, I can leave you the pleasure of working it out.

Plus a brooch worth twelve hundred francs that I had to give to Rose who was beginning to want me only once a week.

## CHAPTER 32

But someone who made a hell of a fuss that night was Hortense. I thought I would find her in tears, repentant, overcome. Or that she wouldn't say a thing, following the golden rule of the Masures. But not a bit of it. I hadn't even taken my coat off. I hadn't even hung up my hat in place of Dugommier's, before she came out of her kitchen and attacked me. On the landing.

"Disgusting creature !"

Me ? It's safe to say that you never come to the end of your astonishment.

"Thief !"

All that on the landing. She who always worried so much about the neighbours. I pushed her back into the kitchen. But she didn't stop. And Marthe holding on to her skirts and crying.

"You can rest assured. You wanted to tarnish my love. You've succeeded."

I should have answered. I couldn't think of anything to say. I no longer had the *brio* of the afternoon. Since then there had been the dentist, Rose, too many things. And states of grace pass quickly, I've already had the opportunity to observe.

"Dishonouring me !"

What a nerve ! Was I the cuckold or not ? But I couldn't get angry. I tried to be sarcastic.

"Because I'm dishonouring you ! You're deceiving me, but I'm dishonouring you. That's original."

"But it's that money ! The money that you took. Like a thief."

"And what about him ?"

“ What do you mean, him ? ”

“ He’s stealing my wife from me.”

That went home, I think. She began to cry. And Marthe cried louder and louder.

“ He insulted me.”

“ A wife who deceives her husband deserves to be insulted.”

The fact was that I had logic on my side. It came back to me gradually.

“ But the money. He thinks I’m your accomplice.”

“ You’re my wife.”

“ He thinks I inveigled him here to rob him.”

With some hesitation. She couldn’t have been sure that it was the right word.

“ He takes me for a thief. For a prostitute. He said I was a prostitute.”

“ But why did you do it ? ”

I put on a tiger-like expression.

“ If someone steals a man’s wife, his wife whom he loves, hasn’t he the right to use any possible means to get her back ? ”

She stopped crying.

“ But, Emile. . . ”

“ What ? ”

“ I thought you didn’t care for me any more.”

“ You were wrong.”

She looked at me anxiously, with her handkerchief rolled up into a ball in front of her mouth. Marthe was still crying. I took her by the hand. I put her in the lounge (it gives me a pain in the neck every time I have to write that word). I came back to the kitchen. Hortense hadn’t moved.

“ Emile,” she said. “ Please forgive me for the wrong I’ve done you.”



I took her by the shoulders in a friendly way, looking as though I was overcome. She sniffled.

“ Poor Hortense.”

Then,

“ But what about the money ? ” she said.

I was never going to hear the last of that money.

“ What ? ”

“ Are you going to give it back to him ? ”

“ The money ? Never.”

Damn, I'd spoken a bit too soon. Hortense was already drawing back.

“ But what are you going to do with it ? ”

“ I've given it to charity.”

That floored her. It was clear that she couldn't bring herself to believe it, but she didn't dare question it either. She went further away. She looked at me as though she'd never seen me before.

“ But what will Victor think ? ”

“ I don't care a damn what he thinks.”

“ He'll go on thinking I'm your accomplice.”

“ What does that matter ? I don't suppose you intend to see him again.”

“ But, Emile, how's he going to live this month ? With his mother, too ? ”

“ To hell with his mother.”

It was getting really petty. I began to shout.

“ The money ! Always the money ! But my suffering ! Doesn't my suffering count ? I've been watching you for a month ! A whole month ! Eating my heart out ! I thought I'd kill you ! Both of you ! I thought I'd send you both to hell ! ”

“ But Emile ! ” said Hortense. “ Emile ! ”

## CHAPTER 33

Elise was the first person to speak to me about it again. One day she came round to the Ministry. She asked for me.

“ Well, Emile,” she said, “ don’t we see you any more ? ”

What did that mean ? Beforehand we didn’t see each other six times a year.

“ What about Hortense ? ”

“ Well, I took them by surprise.”

“ You didn’t ! ”

“ I did, I’m telling you. And I chased Dugommier out of the house with a kick in the pants.”

“ And what about Hortense ? ”

“ She’s sorry.”

“ So it’s official, then ? ”

“ What do you mean, official ? ”

“ Can I mention it at last ? Because until now I didn’t dare.”

“ But you saw as much as I did, didn’t you ? ”

“ It was rather special, Emile.”

That’s what it was. She was still thinking about her behind. She had been close to a tragedy. A man and a woman had made love in front of her eyes. Another man had suffered. Or might have suffered. A home was breaking up. What did she remember out of all that ? How a hand, for one moment, had touched her behind. Incredible.

In short, the next day, when I came back home, I found Hortense in tears and Madame Masure in front of her, with the expression that she kept for special days, her

face severe and serious. And around the women was a sort of smell. A smell of words. I don't know whether you've ever noticed, but a room where people have talked a lot doesn't smell like other rooms. It has a special smell. Especially when it's a question of earnest words, definite suggestions and family scenes.

"Hullo, mother-in-law."

She got up.

"Emile," she said, "I had misjudged you. I'm sorry."

That's typical all right. People consider you to be a swine. O.K. Then, without you changing one iota, just because there's another swine in the offing, people don't consider you quite so swinish any more. Where's the logic of that? Or perhaps too Madame Masure felt reassured. Before she regarded me as a queer customer. Now I was only a deceived husband. In one sense, that was simpler.

"My poor Emile!"

In the Masure vocabulary, 'my poor so-and-so' was the sign that you were held in the highest possible esteem. Highest was a relative word, of course, since the really highest esteem was reserved for a few special people: Monsieur Raffard, the big white chief.

"You can say thank you to him, you know, Hortense."

I quite agreed.

"It was very handsome to forgive you like that."

And then next Sunday we had a visit from the whole family, everyone. Charlotte included. She looked at me kindly. With interest. I hadn't changed, however, but I suppose that the fact of being a deceived husband was thought to make me less dangerous.

And the care they took!

"Let's have some whist, Emile. That'll take your mind off things."

I put on a depressed look.

"If you like, dad."

Madame Masure threw a severe glance at Hortense. Or else she would pass comment.

"How dreadful it is! A boy who was so bright."

Note that with the Masures, the system was usually to mention nothing, to act as though... But this time, I don't know why, the system broke down. My wife had been unfaithful to me: they talked about it incessantly. But tactfully. One day Masure, in an absent-minded way, happened to tell a story about a deceived husband; he wasn't half treated like dirt.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? That poor boy . . ."

I played my part. With relish.

"Don't worry, mother, I. . ."

Strong-willed, sticking my chin out.

"I WANT to forget."

"That's wonderful, Emile. Did you hear that. Hortense?"

"Yes, mother."

Charlotte smiled. And Elise said:

"Oh, I'm not afraid on his account. Emile has more character than people realise."

That was still her bottom. Ah, that bottom was between us. Between her and me. Like a round table in a café. An obsession. In her every glance, her every word.

Except for the fact that after a month I realised that Hortense had begun to deceive me again. Oh, yes, I understood at once. That woman was made for lying as much as I was made for aquaplaning. One day I hid and watched her; she went out, I followed her, she met her Dugommier in a café in the rue d'Aboukir. From there they went to a hotel, in the same street. What I was never able to know, for example, was how she explained the wallet

business to him. Had she been able to convince him that she'd had nothing to do with it ? Or that I'd really given the money to charity ? (But after all, the little girls in the rue du Cygne were poor. Do you think that they'd have been in that profession if they'd been rich ?) Or perhaps Dugommier had no pride. It's disgusting sometimes, the things that love can make you do.

Note that in one sense it was all the same to me. What made me angry was the way they got going again without me. Once more I was left out. Rejected. Treated like dirt. And once more I had to find a way of breaking out of this solitude. The solitude where those two persisted in putting me. Then, one Sunday morning, I went to see Dugommier. He lived in the rue Juliette-Dodu. I rang. An old hag appeared.

"Monsieur Dugommier, please."

"My son ?"

Another good question. She ought to know, shouldn't she ?

"Yes, please, madam."

I was shown into a sort of drawing-room, with trinkets from Indo-China. Dugommier arrived.

"You ?"

Apparently.

"You're a fine sort of bastard," he said as an opening gambit. He pitched into me, too.

Ah, I made a fine deceived husband. If it hadn't been for the Masures. . .

"Monsieur Victor," I said. "Have you such little respect for your mistress that you can't even respect her husband ?"

He bowed (sic).

"You're right, of course."

The system ! With this chappy, it's enough to appeal to the system. Words. Like handcuffs. Like a gag.

"All the more so since it's about her that I've come to see you. And in fact on her account."

And I existed. I had found my dash again, my ease. MY SPONTANEITY of the other afternoon, when they were in bed. There are moments like this when you get the impression that another being (no : quite simply a being) has come to life in you; that it's swelling with every movement, every word of yours, and that little by little it's taking you over from top to toe. There we were, facing one another, Dugommier and I, the husband and the lover, each one established in his part, busy with it, and fulfilling it to the utmost. And I felt that it was a deliverance as well, a relief to be established at last in WHAT ONE IS.

"Explain yourself," he told me.

Very aloof, very much the gent, hands in his jacket pockets. A maroon-coloured smoking-jacket with black satin facings. Very easy. Too easy. I was going to jerk him out of his smugness. Not half. I adopted the down-to-earth style.

"As I see it, Monsieur Victor, you sleep with my wife."

"Do I?"

"Is there anyone else then? Are we both being bitched?" Old Dugommier winced. His hands out of his pockets already.

"Now as far as I'm concerned, Monsieur Victor, I've got responsibilities. My poor mother . . ."

"Me, too," he told me.

That was stupid, that remark, don't you think?

"Yes, but I've got Hortense as well, I have. Now look here, Monsieur Victor, do you think it's right, is it fair to take advantage of a woman who's being paid for by someone else?"

"Sir!"

All he could find to say.

"Why don't you call me Emile any longer?"

He looked at me.

"I've made enquiries, Monsieur Victor. Not that I'm that way inclined myself, but I know some of my colleagues sometimes have to make use of professional women. Now the worst kind of old bag will want at least twenty-five francs any time. And you wouldn't take any old bag, I'm sure. And the cost of the room and the tip. Before you know where you are it's seventy-five francs, Monsieur Victor. Every time."

At that he bowed his head, like a man caught in one of those mosquito ballets in the summer.

"But what are you talking about?"

"What? I'm pointing out the economies you're making with Hortense."

By now, according to my reckoning, old Dugommier should have got wild. There always comes a point when you're talking money to men when they get wild. Not to mention the fact that my words weren't perhaps as nice to hear as they might have been. Now he didn't get wild. Instead he even seemed to be afraid. Seemed to be on the look-out too. Both hands slightly raised in front of him."

"The economies you're making, Monsieur Victor. Over my head. And on top of Hortense, in fact."

That last remark was one which came to me just like that. Unexpected. Just fell out of the sky.

"Yes, on top of Hortense, that's the very word for it."

Would you have put up with someone saying that about your mistress? He put up with it, he did. I'd begun to laugh. He smiled. A miserable sort of smile. Floating stupidly in the middle of his big face. And watching me all the while.

"Now eight or ten times a month, Monsieur Victor, well, you can work it out for yourself. So if I ask you for a five hundred franc note, I don't think I'd be exaggerating."

"Five hundred francs!"

He'd woken up at last. These men, once you touch their pocket. . .

"Five hundred francs, Emile. . ."

A sugary tone of voice. Like talking to a sick man. He was afraid. I could have sworn he was afraid.

"For our dear Hortense's comfort, Monsieur Victor. After all. To be precise I want to buy her some nice bedroom slippers."

"Of course, bedroom slippers. . ."

"Bedroom slippers."

"Yes. Oh well, it's a jolly good idea."

"And I'd very much like to buy myself a smoking jacket, as well. The same kind as yours."

I stretched out my hand, to feel the stuff, friendly-like. But he drew away, still looking at me all the time, his manner no more reassured than that.

"A five hundred franc note, Monsieur Victor. I'll put the difference to it. You'll give me that, won't you?"

Not at all in any menacing fashion. Simply asking. But he was dying of fright, all the same, that was obvious.

"Willingly, willingly, Emile. But, Emile, I don't have it on me."

"Have a good look, Monsieur Victor."

"I'm positive."

"Poor Hortense. She'll be so upset to see me come back empty-handed."

He was somewhat shattered.

"Oh, Emile, you're exaggerating."

"Exaggerating!"

I shouted that. He jumped.

"Just make a little effort, Monsieur Victor. A good one."

In the end he gave them to me, the five hundred francs. The bastard.



## CHAPTER 34

I ought to explain. Good. I know what you'll tell me: that three-quarters of our actions have neither reasons nor explanations. Exactly. But if you describe only our actions, you run the risk also of falsifying everything. Because our deeds, they're one thing, and we ourselves, we're another altogether. We aren't entirely contained in them, in our deeds. Or they aren't enough to fill us. I went to Dugommier. I squeezed five hundred francs out of him. Then, the month after, four hundred. Then seven hundred and fifty. And by doing this, I got a double pleasure out of it. Firstly, laying my hands on some dough. Secondly, existing, achieving some weight. Not to mention that these sessions interested me. I prolonged them with pleasure. Once I stayed there an hour and a half. He couldn't manage any more, old Dugommier. But in fact you're not going to sum me up in those sixteen hundred and fifty francs. And in three months, three meetings, even long ones, that doesn't explain everything. There remain all the other days. The other mornings. The other afternoons. The other evenings. There remained me in fact. My actions didn't have any reasons. Good. Or not very clear reasons. But they existed somewhere. In a certain place. There were the acts and they had their setting. Which also deserves to be described. Doesn't it? And this setting was myself, in fact. I'd better explain.

Because there was still everything else. There was still Rose, and my roamings in the streets, and sometimes the tarts in the doorways of their passages. All that went on and even more. I had more money, and more time as

well. I was much more free. I came home at eight, or at ten, or at midnight, and it didn't mean anything any longer. It would not have been any use Hortense saying anything to me. In a way, it could even have suited me fine, this arrangement. I might even have rented a room and begun that harvest of the damned that I dreamed of. Re-established the rue Montorgueil life. The life underneath.

But I deceived myself. Deceived myself completely. Because going where you like is not the same thing as going with the stream. And the life underneath, that's the stream. Or rather: there's a kind of freedom which is doing what you like. Good. But beyond that, there's another kind, deeper, more substantial, more peaceful as well, as if it were asleep, a freedom of the bottom of the sea, I would call it, a freedom which consists in no longer doing what you want, but doing it without even wanting to any more. Going with the stream, I can't say better than that. But, to do that, you must abandon yourself entirely. Not by halves. You can say: from four o'clock till six, I shall do as I'm told, but from six to eight I shall do what I like. But you can't say, from four till six I shall do what I'm told, but from six to eight I shall go with the stream. Because you don't go under the surface as you go down into a cellar. To live underneath the surface, you must, to begin with, have lost all memory of the surface itself. You can't live with one foot under and one foot over. And for me there remained the upper part. There remained the surface. There remained Hortense, the Measures, there remained even Dugommier. It was a waste trying to abandon myself, there always came a moment when the trellis took hold of me again, as if by the hairs, the reasons, motives, things, lifting me up, and putting me back in the rue de Provence, between Hortense and Dugommier. In this other world. In my other part. My cuckold's part. A part like any

other. A prison like any other. That I didn't succeed in getting out of. The apartment, the rent, the Masures. A curious thing: I felt almost free with regard to Hortense, but I wasn't free with regard to the Masures. One day, Rose said to me:

"Eugène's going to Abbeville tomorrow. For his boss. We could spend the night together."

I didn't dare. Because of the Masures. Who had to be paying us a visit that same night. Who would have known as a result.

Take note that I could have got a divorce. Dugommier dropped a word or two about it to me one day. I said no. At once. An impulse.

"Monsieur Victor, there's no question of that."

Why not ? Perhaps because I felt that it would not have been enough to detach me from them. Divorced, I would still have thought about them, still tried to take the piss out of them. A prison, I told you. The bonds of marriage exist all right. Hortense was there and I felt myself bound to her. Stupid, wasn't it ? The life of the heart is sometimes stupid. Hortense dead, that was another matter. And I began to think of it. But alive, she still concerned me. And it was beyond my power to let these two live without me. Blotting me out. Suppressing me. Acting as if I didn't exist. They in their egg. And me outside. Excluded, rejected. That's what I was not willing to accept. And I went to Dugommier. To ask him for money ? Yes, in a sense. But above all so that they would STOP forgetting me. To come to life again. To bring myself to their attention again. I could have used some other means ? O.K. What sort ? Tears and groans ? Old Dugommier would have replied with platitudes, and he would have forgotten the next minute. Threats ? He was twice as broad as I was. Whereas by taking his money, I got at him. Miser, old Dugommier.

Economical. With his mother. His sister who looked after herself, who followed a diet. And so for him, five hundred francs, that meant something. It kept him short. It made a hole. A hole that was me. Privations, each one of which was me. Because you can also exist by the gap you create. See the vacuum cleaner. Or the father of a family who disappears.

Well then, this effort that I was making to rejoin them, this effort which by the very fact of it included love, what I couldn't forgive them for was despising it as they did. Yes, that's why I began to hate them. They could have repelled me with shouts, insults, violence. That I would have understood. But that's just what they didn't do. By virtue of bitching them, I had succeeded in living in them, by existing in them, good, but this existence, at the same time as they accepted it, they made it laughable, stupid, ridiculous. Because one day I realised that they took me FOR A MADMAN. For a madman, me. Think of the ignominy. THEIR ignominy. For a madman! I, who was crying out for them. I who was stretching out my arms towards them.

Note that I didn't understand this all at once. I went to Dugommier's. Each time I found words that were more and more poisonous. I thought he would lose his temper. He didn't lose it. On the contrary. He spoke gently to me. With respect. I went back home. I found Hortense again. Now he must have kept her up to date, old Dugommywhatsit. Imagine, living with his ha'pennies as he did. He must have pinned her ears back with it, all this money he was giving me.

"Another four hundred. Fancy that, Hortense. Oh! you're costing me dear."

Well then, Hortense said nothing. Nothing. Not a word. Not a hint. On the first of the month, I handed her

my salary. It was she who looked after all the payments, the rent as well as the housekeeping. And I said:

“ I’ve kept two hundred francs for pocket money.”

You’d think she’d have said to me:

‘ You’ve already had five hundred from Dugommier.’

(A thing which after a fashion would have consoled me.) Not at all. Nothing.

I told myself, it’s not possible, she’s holding it back, but one day she’ll end up by bursting out. But nothing. At least an allusion. Not an allusion. She talked to me like the other did. Gentle. Sugary.

“ Of course, Emile. How right you are, Emile.”

As if that could mean something to me to be right. As if it could mean something to me to be right with people who doubted my reason. People who, not succeeding in suppressing me as a husband, suppressed me in a more underhand, treacherous, even more despicable way, who suppressed me as a conscious being. Because for them, I was a fool. Did I talk logic ? For them it was madness. Did I talk arithmetic ? Madness. Did I try to insinuate myself into their system ? Into their universe ? Madness. All that remained was the vague fear that I aroused in them. I discovered in Hortense the same look as in Dugommier, a watchful look, that never left me. At table, I picked up my knife. Hortense jumped. I stood up. I felt her eyes following me. I came round behind her: she turned round quickly. But, I repeat it, a vague fear. Because, at the same time, with that sort of madness that takes people in front of someone they think mad, they troubled less and less to pretend, to maintain appearances.

“ Of course, Emile.”

“ Certainly, my dear Emile.”

But without even taking the trouble to give it an attempted conviction. Telling me God knows what. More

frightening and more stupid, that's what I'd become for them. Dangerous, but easier to deceive.

"Oh, definitely, Emile."

But at the same time, renewing the habit of meeting in my place, in my own apartment. Believing I wouldn't notice. When all I had to do was count the cigarettes that I left in the little silver-plated box in the 'lounge'. Because Dugommier was not the man to smoke his own cigarettes when there were others to hand. Then I must say, that it was more convenient for Hortense. Because of Marthe. Otherwise she had to leave her in charge of the concierge. While, like this, she put her to bed for her afternoon sleep, and goodnight. Without counting the economy of the hotel. Dugommier must have reckoned it all up.

"Seven hundred and fifty francs that he took from me again. I must get that back."

And also, undoubtedly:

"Besides, what the hell, he's mad, he'll never notice."

Yes, I'm not afraid to say so, it's because of that I began to hate them. I didn't care a damn about their affair. What I didn't forgive them for, was this parody, this derision that they built up around me. I was crying out for them. I could have understood that they might not have heard me. But that hearing me they despised me—and despised me to the point of taking me for a madman—that, that was ignominy.

Not to mention the fact that this derision, this parody, this madness, they even tried to build it up between other people and me. When I say that I understood, I'm simplifying matters. In fact, it was Elise who put me wise. Another interesting detail: this woman who had never paid any attention to me, who had never shown me anything but indifference, well ! since I had touched her on the bottom,

she was on my side (the tails side, of course). And one day:

“ You know, Emile, Hortense thinks that you’re mad. She told me so. A dangerous lunatic.”

Oh, that was a flash of light. Abruptly, everything became clear to me. Their attentions. Their way of speaking to me.

“ And you,” I asked her. “ Do you think I’m mad ? ”

“ Not all the time, in any case,” she answered.

It’s like that with women. Just put your hand on their bottom—an action about which after all you can say what you like, but which doesn’t imply any particular use of reason—and immediately there they are, saying:

“ Mad ? Him ? Not at all. On the contrary.”

Mad ? So there were two people who took me for a lunatic. And sincerely, I’m convinced of that. For a moment I had doubts about myself. Has anyone ever taken you for a lunatic? It’s about as contagious as can be. Yes, there were moments when I no longer felt myself my own master. I pulled faces, I shouted for nothing. Hortense was watching me. I imagined her with her Dugommier.

“ I assure you, Victor. He worries me. It gets worse every day.”

This fear all around me. Like a menace. Like a danger. And a danger which one day was defined in a funny way. I’d gone to the bedroom to get a handkerchief. I went up to the chest of drawers, and God knows why, instead of devoting myself to the upper drawer which was reserved for me, I seized the handle of the one underneath. It was locked. With a key. Ha, ha ! This is something new, this ! What’s it locked for ? I looked for the key. No key. I took the upper drawer, pulled it out, put my hand through into the lower one, ferreted about in the linen and brought out what ? A REVOLVER. In its

holster. And on the holster, the manufacturer's mark. Lebreton-Saigon. SAIGON. Dugommier's revolver ! Dugommier's revolver in Hortense's drawer. It was quite clear, I thought. A lunatic. A dangerous lunatic.

"Hortense thinks you're mad, a dangerous lunatic."

And Dugommier as well. Dugommier also believed it. His little courtesies. His look which never left me. And the poor woman who lives with a dangerous lunatic, what do you do for her ? You lend her your revolver.

"In case he should ever have a fit. With a madman you must look out for everything."



## CHAPTER 35

That changed everything, that revolver. Besides, I don't know if you've ever noticed it, that little weapon, put it where you like, into a hand or on a table, and nothing is the same any more. You'd say that there's no longer anything but that. That it begins to take on all the different existences which until then floated all around it. A minute before, I was only a deceived husband. A deceived husband like the others. Because of this revolver, there, I've become a hunted man. A man in peril. Who must think of defending himself. And who at the same time, has just discovered the means of self-defence. Because after all, the revolver, that was free. It was STILL free. Anyone could make use of it. Not necessarily Hortense. And not necessarily against me. It kills, a revolver does. But not necessarily the one the bullet's intended for. And with Hortense dead, I might find the Montorgueil paradise again, the life underneath, the stream. Isn't that right ?

Luckily, I'd only touched the case. I wiped it. I put it all back under the clothes. And I began to elaborate my plan.

At first, by degrees, I let things slacken off. I no longer went to Dugommier's. With Hortense, I was a good little boy, the brave cuckold, who suspects nothing. Fatherly. The inference: skip it ! Let's bury the past. say no more about it. Or even, one day :

"Do you remember the Dugommier period ? Ah ! you didn't half make me wild."

But every single phrase, every single gesture, every smile was from then on inspired by AN EXCELLENT CUNNING.

Then one day, when I had a long evening in front of me, Marthe in bed, I opened the scene. Hortense was reading the paper, the pages spread out before her on the red plush tablecloth. Then I, hot on the trail:

“What did you do this afternoon?”

“Odds and ends about the house. I didn’t go out.”

“That’s a lie! You had a rendezvous with Dugommier.”

Hortense’s beautiful radiant smile. The beautiful radiant smile of a woman, who, in the wrong a thousand times, is nicely surprised on the one occasion when she isn’t.

“No, I hadn’t, Emile.”

“I saw you.”

I was shouting.

“I’ve been watching you. You met him again. You both went into a hotel in the rue Tronchet.”

“I can assure you, Emile.”

“I saw you!”

Note that I hadn’t watched anything at all. That probably she never set foot in any hotel in the rue Tronchet.

“I saw you!”

I was bellowing. She regarded me with that air that people have faced with a lunatic letting himself go, quite pale above her paper, equally white.

“Emile!”

“I know you saw him this afternoon. I can FEEL you saw him.”

I can feel: the word was well chosen. She couldn’t even hide her relief. And I, after a few more snorts:

“Why don’t you confess it? I can understand things well enough, you know.”

AND I WAS EXISTING. Every atom of me. Dash. Ease. Mastery. Words coming of their own accord. Dropping right out of the sky. Filled right up to the back of my throat with words.

“ Once again, Hortense, I want to forgive you.”

Pause.

“ I want to forgive you, but on one condition, that is that you write to this creature at once, breaking it off. Breaking it off FOR GOOD AND ALL.”

“ But, Emile, since I assure you. . .”

“ Silence ! I insist ! ”

I began to shout again.

“ If you haven’t seen him again, your letter will only confirm it.”

Incontestable.

“ Yes or no, do you consent to write this letter ? ”

“ But of course, Emile, certainly.”

Like talking to a drunk. To a madman. To calm me down. An idiotic caprice, but to be excused in me. Argue ? With a lunatic ?

“ I’ll dictate it.”

“ As you wish, Emile.”

Without even taking the trouble to discuss it, to try to prove that to me. It was that which was so terrible with them, both of them, Hortense and Dugommier. They were afraid of me, I saw that plainly, but a fear restricted to my madness, restricted to the fits I might have, to the violence I might commit. My intelligence, my perspicacity, they weren’t suspicious of that any more. A lunatic, isn’t he ? And in front of a lunatic, the most stupid person can’t prevent themselves from feeling the more cunning. As if they were in front of a child. To whom you answer anything you like, hardly bothering to hide the wink. ‘ Of course, my poppet. Father Christmas ? But certainly, my little angel.’

“ Of course, Emile.”

And her thoughts stupidly laid out in front of me. As clear as daylight. ‘ Of course, Emile. Of course, poor idiot. I’ll write it for you, your letter. And you can put

it in the post yourself. And perhaps you're the one who'll prevent me from telephoning him tomorrow. He was in a frantic state, Victor, you understand, so I couldn't care less what I wrote.'

"If you like, Emile."

But I, I saw my plan before me, and I felt excited. I took some paper, an envelope.

"There you are."

The bottle of ink in its yellow box. Hortense. Her lemon yellow bodice.

"I'll dictate: Sir. No, first of all, the date. And put Victor, it's more natural. With an exclamation mark. Victor! Three months ago, after the scene with my husband that was really quite justified, I made it clear to you that I did not want to see you any more. In spite of that, you have not stopped pursuing me with your attentions and propositions. This sort of thing must end. In the name of my past as an honest woman, I insist. You have already done enough harm in a home that, before your arrival, was happy and united. I owe it to my daughter. I owe it to my husband, who is a model for other men. I demand that you make no further attempts to see me. It would in any case be useless, for I have nothing but contempt for your tears, threats and fits of temper. Wishing to act in complete loyalty to my husband, I shall show him this letter, as I will show him the reply that I expect from you. In it, I hope, you will give your word not to see me any more. On this condition, we will be able to hold you again in that esteem which we had for you formerly. Mrs. Magis, wife of Emile Magis."

There were two or three crossings-out. Coming from me, of course. Hortense wrote like a lamb, without any comment. But, here and there, she couldn't keep back a smile. I took good heed of those smiles. Sometimes you'd like to forgive people. It's they who prevent you.

Then, thanks to the corrections, I made her start the letter again. And I kept the rough. Next:

"I have confidence in you, Hortense. You will put this letter in the post yourself. But I shan't be satisfied until you show me the reply."

With the result that two days later, in the morning, still in her dressing-gown, Hortense handed to me, without opening it, a letter that the postman had just delivered. The letter which, without doubt, the night before, they had written together, the bastards. Not giving a tuppenny cuss for me. But patience.

"My love," wrote Dugommier. . .

What a nerve! My love! To my wife! And to think I might have had scruples.

"My love, let me pen those words once again, for I cannot believe that your cruel decision is irrevocable. But I wish to obey you. Since you insist upon it, I promise not to try to see you any more. May you never regret discarding a love like mine. For myself, I regret it as I regret that your decision deprives me of the pleasure I used to have in meeting your husband, a man so worthy of esteem. In conclusion, let me also assure you that at the slightest appeal from you I shall hasten to your side, and my devotion will for ever be at your disposal. I will not say goodbye, Hortense, but au revoir. Victor."

"There you are! Now are you satisfied?" asked Hortense.

He hadn't overstrained himself, old Dugommier. But I adopted a benevolent air.

"All is forgotten. Say no more about it. And look, this evening, as a celebration, we'll go out to a restaurant. Have a good old tuck-in."

"But, Emile. . ."

There, she looked quite put out.

"Yes, yes, I mean it. Don't you think that this is a fine day for me, the day on which I find my Hortense again?"

The next day was Thursday. Thursday, you may have noticed, generally occurs the day before Friday. And Friday was one of the two days when Dugommier could be at liberty. Getting on for three, I went in to Monsieur Raffard, looking very sorry for myself.

"Oh, Monsieur Raffard, this toothache's come back again now."

"You overdo it with that toothache, Magis."

"It's the toothache that overdoes it, Monsieur Raffard. May I have your permission to go to the dentist?"

Good. I went.

"But that's all over, your toothache," the chap said to me.

"You think so? The thing is, it's left me so worn-out. I could very well do with a little holiday. To get some rest."

"A little holiday! How many tits has your little holiday got? Two, I bet."

In the end he signed a certificate for me.

"Three days, Monsieur Magis. Really, I can't make it any more. As it is already."

I sent the paper to Raffard. I dawdled about for a bit. At half past six, I went home.

"I've taken some leave tomorrow."

Hortense raised her head. A little quickly. Good, I'd hit the jackpot: she was expecting to see him tomorrow, her Dugommier.

"I shall take advantage of it to go to Meaux. To see my mother. It must be ages since I last saw her. Not since Justine's funeral."

"What a good idea," she said.

With a little too much enthusiasm.

"I shall get a train at two-forty. I may be back rather late. Not before nine o'clock. Don't be worried."

The following morning I mooched around, letting myself be seen in the district, going to chat with the concierge.

"Aren't you going to the Ministry, then, Monsieur Magis?"

"I've taken a little leave, Madame Losson. You must let the old machine have a rest sometimes."

"How right you are, Monsieur Magis."

Hortense was coming down the stairs.

"I've left Marthe up there. Are you going up, Emile?"

"Straightaway."

I took this opportunity to get the revolver. With my gloves. I examined it. It was loaded. The bastards! I put it in my overcoat pocket. Then, towards two o'clock, after lunch:

"So! I'm popping off!"

"Give your mother a kiss for me."

That's life for you. The poor husband goes to see his mother. The wife waits for her lover. And one might have pitied them! So I went down. I went into a few shops. To the jeweller's to have my watch repaired. To the stationer's to buy a pencil. With a lot of fiddlededee. Making myself noticed.

"It is a Royal Venus, isn't it? That's the only brand I like. With the others, the lead gets used up in no time."

Barley sugar for Marthe. Cigarettes from the tobacconist. Hanging about every time. With a word or two about the weather—which was raining. Then I went and sat down in the café, which is almost opposite us. And I waited. At three o'clock, there was Dugommier, arriving. With his hat suggesting the adventurer who knows how to do things. Who went past. Who entered

my house. He was damned. And damned by what ? By his meanness. He should have told Hortense to come and meet him in a hotel, and I should have had to change everything. But you'll never go wrong if you count on people's meanness.

" Goodbye for the present, sir ! "

" So long, Monsieur Magis. "

I folded my newspaper, taking it very easy, very calm. Without having to force myself, what's more. That's the curious thing. When the moment came to act, lethargy seized me again. These last few days I'd lived fully. But now the dream had got hold of me again. The thing which didn't concern me.

I crossed the street. Went upstairs. Quietly. My gloves. I'd forgotten them. Put them on. Listened at the door of the dining-room. Nothing. I slipped inside. Darkness. Marthe in her cot, sleeping. Up to the door of the ' lounge '. Nothing. Not a sound. I looked through the key-hole. There they were. Kissing. I took hold of the revolver. I opened the door. They sprang apart, both of them, like a spring snapping, Hortense with her hand over her mouth, as if SHE WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HIDE IT, HER KISS.

And I fired. Without waiting. Three shots. Crack, crack, crack. Hortense had fallen. I would have liked to take aim at Dugommier. Take aim only, since I COULD not kill him. But it was beyond my powers. I threw the revolver across the room, and beat it. I just had time to hear Marthe who had woken and was calling out. Down the stairs. Running. Bawling out. HOOOO ! HOOOO ! Blast, my gloves ! I took them off, without pausing in my descent. Arrived at the concierge's. Already doors were opening on all the landings.

" He'll kill me ! Kill me ! Madame Losson. "



There she was, stupidly, in her enormous armchair, with her hair in a bun.

“ He’ll kill me ! He’s after me.”

I locked the door behind me, turning the key twice.

“ You’re mad, Monsieur Magis.”

Again !

“ NO, I’M NOT MAD. He’s killed my wife. My wife ! He wanted to kill me, me, as well.”

And I was crying. Real tears.

“ The police, Madame Losson. Call the police.”

The tenants had come down, shouting in the corridor. Madame Losson stood up. She opened her little hatch. There was a silence, then voices louder and louder. I heard the Blanjean boy from the first floor.

“ I’m going to find the police.”

And I in the big armchair, weak, collapsing, hidden by the vast behind of Madame Losson at her little hatch, surrounded by knitting and balls of wool, I who was slowly coming back up to the surface, to ask myself the question: NOW HOW WILL HE BE ABLE TO PROVE THAT IT WASN’T HE WHO FIRED ?

## CHAPTER 36

And of course, he couldn't prove it. The fact was that everything was against him too. HIS revolver. HIS fingerprints. HIS letter. His own lawyer who obviously didn't believe him, and who looked at me miserably during the cross-examinations. Not counting a magistrate and a representative of the public prosecutor who alternated beautifully in nastiness. In probability. Logic.

"The thing is simple, gentlemen. Tragic, but simple. After his mistress had sent him away, Dugommier pursued her with his supplications and threats. With his threats, gentlemen, the term occurs again in the letter which the victim has left us like an act of irrefutable accusation. Crazy with love, or more probably wounded in his pride, Dugommier pursues the unfortunate woman again. He goes to her flat. Because he wanted to frighten her, or because he was already thinking of his revenge, he armed himself with his revolver. The wretched woman resisted his pleas and his new menaces. So he fired."

"It isn't true ! It isn't true."

"What isn't true ?"

"None of it's true. Not a word."

"For Dugommier denies everything, gentlemen. Everything, even the evidence. That's easier."

"It was Magis who fired."

"Then why did he fire when his wife was resisting you ?"

"She didn't resist me."

"You're harming your victim's reputation. It's not very honourable, but it's classic. Unfortunately, your letter is there to prove to us that your affair was over."

"It was a pretence."

"That's what you say. Why then did you pursue the victim in her own home?"

"I wasn't pursuing her. She had made a date with me."

"Who will believe you when you say that she had made a date with you on the very day that her husband was on holiday, when he might have been either in the flat or come back at any moment?"

"I suppose that when we arranged the meeting she didn't know that her husband would be on holiday."

THE LAWYER: I would like to point out in fact. . .

"But Dugommier himself has admitted that the victim sometimes telephoned him at his office. Now, on the morning of the crime the concierge and the tradespeople in the district say so—the victim went out and she went out alone. So she then had plenty of time to telephone to Dugommier, to warn him, to put him off."

"Perhaps she still didn't know?"

"Ridiculous. Magis hung round the flat and the building all morning. So his wife knew that he was on leave. She knew it all the more so because it was she who had asked her husband to take this leave, because, owing to presentiments she felt, she was afraid of a visit from Dugommier."

THE LAWYER: On this point we only have the evidence of Magis.

"But what is feasible in a different way, sir, is the evidence of the accused. In any case, this fact remains: Magis was on holiday, and his wife couldn't be unaware of the fact. She could have put Dugommier off and she didn't do it. So there couldn't have been any meeting arranged. So the interview couldn't have been fixed. And how could it have been since, in a letter from the accused himself, it is stated that the affaire was over?"

"But this letter was a pretence."

"You've already said so. That doesn't hold water."

"BUT IT WAS MAGIS WHO FIRED."

"Magis, precisely. The same old story ! It was Magis who fired. With YOUR revolver."

"I'd given it to Hortense."

"Bought in Saigon. No doubt Magis made a trip to Saigon specially to buy it."

"But I'd given it to Hortense."

"Dead men tell no tales. But this time, Dugommier, the dead woman denies what you say. If the revolver had been in the hands of the victim, it would have had her finger-prints on it. The only ones on it were yours."

"It was in a holster."

"It's true there was also the holster. This famous holster which no doubt only existed in your imagination. Where has this holster got to ?"

(Into the Seine, sir. I'd forgotten it, just imagine. In the pocket of my coat. You can't think of everything. So I threw it in the river. After putting a few stones into it for ballast.)

"Where has it got to ?"

"I don't know."

"Ah ! And then, why did you give this revolver to the victim ? It's a curious sort of present to give to one's mistress."

"Because she was afraid of her husband becoming violent."

"Gentlemen of the Jury, you have seen Magis. Is he the sort of man to frighten people ? All the statements by witnesses on the contrary show him to be a good-natured type, a dreamer. You've heard his chief, Monsieur Raffard. 'Magis is a gay dog.' You've heard his father-in-law, 'He liked playing cards.' The concierge, 'That morning he came again to have a word with me.' His wife

deceived him and he forgave her. On two occasions. And this is the man whom the accused tries to show us as a brutal type against whom people must defend themselves with firearms."

"You don't know what Magis is like. He's a . . . a terrible man."

"But in your letter you assured him of your esteem."

"That was in order to calm him."

"So you were telling a lie."

"Yes, if you like."

"But if you told lies in your letters, can it be proved that you're not lying in this court?"

"I'm not lying. Magis is crazy."

"Is he crazy or brutal? Make up your mind."

"A madman capable of anything."

"I must warn you, Dugommier in your own interest, that nothing could do you more harm than this system of defence. What, not content with having deceived this man, not content with having broken his home, not content finally with having killed his wife and ruined his existence, you still want to besmirch him with calumnies each more absurd than the last. The wallet story. You've heard the wallet story gentlemen. A music-hall turn of which Magis would have been quite incapable. And then visiting him to get money. It's true that Magis went to see the accused, he said so himself. But for what purpose? To beg him not to run after his wife any more. It is up to us, gentlemen, to find these actions a bit . . . naive. They indicate nonetheless a character to which violence is foreign. But the accused does not hesitate to describe these visits to us as though they were inspired by the vilest of incentives. So, Dugommier, you must manage your libels a bit better. If Magis came to see you, as you say, to make money out of his dishonour, this means that he accepted his dishonour, and that he tolerated your liaison. In that case why

should he suddenly have killed his wife ? Why should he have cut off this source of revenue ? And why then, as you say, should you and the victim be forced to pretend that you were breaking with each other ? Because the husband was in agreement. Why hide this liaison since you were paying for it ? And inversely, why pay if you had succeeded in deceiving the husband, since you had managed to make him believe that your affair was over ?” .

“ He was mad.”

“ That’s a good reason, indeed. But it still doesn’t explain why you gave him that money. If we had to give money to everyone who was mad. . .”

“ I was frightened of him.”

“ You’re twice as strong as he is.”

It was Dugommier’s turn now. His turn to see the egg in front of him. An egg closed up all round. I was hidden inside it, letting nothing show. And he was outside. Excluded. Shouting in vain. Every reason, incentive and probability turned against him. All smooth. Like an egg-shell. Closed.

“ Let us suppose however for a moment, as a pure conjecture, that Magis really is this brute, this madman. That still does not explain how he came to be in possession of YOUR revolver.”

“ He could have found it.”

“ He could have. An easy thing to suppose. And where could he have found it ?”

“ Where Hortense had put it.”

“ That is, supposing that you had really given it to Hortense.! Another hypothesis which cannot be confirmed. And this revolver which went through so many hands has still nothing on it except YOUR finger-prints.”

“ The holster. . .”

“ Exactly. And Magis probably fired without taking

the revolver out of the holster. I should like to have seen that."

"He was wearing gloves."

"Gloves which left YOUR finger-prints ? That's very funny."

"But it was my revolver."

"You admit it then."

"I've never denied it."

"You hear that, gentlemen. He has never denied it."

"This revolver has my finger-prints on it because it belonged to me. And it hasn't got Magis' finger-prints because Magis was wearing gloves."

"Always gloves. This accessory seems to preoccupy you a lot. Unfortunately, the evidence of Magis and the concierge agrees. On that day Magis was not wearing gloves. And the concierge says even that he never wore them."

Never ! The system.

"Magis is a junior employee. He has a pair of gloves for weddings and funerals. He's not the sort of man who would put them on just while he did some shopping in the district."

"He could have put them on on purpose ?"

"Certainly. But for what purpose."

"The purpose of killing us."

"Obviously ! You forget that on your own admission he thought the affair was over. How then could he imagine that he would find you at home ? And especially on that day when, because of his holiday he knew that his wife COULDN'T have made a date with you. Perhaps you'll suggest that his wife had told him about your visit ? That she was in agreement with him ? In agreement to be taken by surprise ? To get herself killed ? To get herself killed, Dugommier ! For you said: to get us killed. You forget one detail, which is that you're still alive."

“ I don’t know, I don’t know any more. But it wasn’t me who fired, I swear it. I wasn’t me.”

“ On one side hypotheses, unlikely ideas, absurd suggestions. Magis could have done this. Magis could have done that. On the strength of that I could have done it too. On the other side, facts, a weapon, finger-prints, letters, a motive as clear as the day, decisive reasons. I will leave the jury to consider things.”

As far as consideration was concerned, they certainly considered things. Twenty years for Dugommier. Twenty years ! In an arm-chair. And Hortense in the cemetery. And me. And my little Marthe.



## CHAPTER 37

Because there is still Marthe.

At the beginning we'd arranged that she would go and live with the Masures. With my work at the Ministry, a man on his own, it wasn't easy for me to look after a little girl. In one sense that suited me. Because of the life underneath that I wanted to get back to. But at first, the curious thing was that I noticed that I missed the child. While Hortense was alive I hardly noticed her. With Hortense dead, there it was, I felt a new link between me and this little girl, as though a new egg was being formed, both of us in the shell together. I realised that if I left her with the Masures she would elude me. The Masure-system, the Masure-reasons, incentives, excuses, woolliness, discretion. She would have been absorbed into it. And me outside, looking on from a long way off, excluded once again, a stranger. And I didn't want that. I didn't want to lose her. It was starting already. I went to the Masures. I found her with a doll. Madame Masure said, commenting,

"Ah, yes, she'll be a little mother."

Already a prisoner. Put on the rails.

Or:

"She hasn't been good today."

Humiliated.

"She didn't want to eat her semolina."

But why should she have wanted to eat her semolina ?

"If she goes on like that she'll never grow up."

Any why must you grow up ? Where is that written ? In the first place it wasn't even true. I've known lots of children who didn't eat semolina. And who are just as

big as I am. But it was the system. The system already. From which I'd suffered so much. And from which Marthe was going to suffer in her turn. And I asked myself this: if one starts in time, isn't there time to create a being who owes nothing to the system? Who would never suffer from the system? If you began right from childhood? Because killing one woman is nothing. BUT KILLING THE SYSTEM?

So I tried to arrange things differently. I managed it. Thanks to the esteem, with which I have been surrounded since the tragedy, I found at Saussoit's, in the rue de Rome, copying work that I could do at home. They lent me a typewriter—the one on which I've been writing this. I learnt how to do it quickly. I'm assured of a minimum of twelve hundred francs a month and often more. I left the Ministry (not without regrets—and from all sides, I can say, because I was well-liked). I took Marthe back. The Masures were sad, but they couldn't say anything in fact.

"Emile is a good father," Madame Masure said.

We live together now, the two of us. And slowly, surely, I've dealt with the system. Oh, I've got my plan, my programme. My programme is to pervert and change everything, to vitiate to the very marrow all these relationships that men have thought of establishing between things. Contrariness. In everything. Because, when you see the results that men obtain with their principles, it couldn't be worse to be contrary in everything. Isn't that true? Discipline for example. Apparently it's discipline that forms characters. Obedience. But who has ever tried the contrary? I try it. At the age of five it's Marthe who gives the orders. For everything. The time we get up and the time we eat our meals.

"Do you want some semolina, Marthe?"

"No, I want steak."

"All right."

Or else:

"Do you want to get up, Marthe?"

"I don't like you."

Because I take the thing as far as to be polite to her when she's rude to me. Her caprice governs everything. If she screams I scream too. If she spits in the street I congratulate her. If she gets angry I pretend to be frightened. When she breaks something it's I who get sent to the corner. When she tells a lie there's some nougat on the mantelpiece. When she tells the truth, there isn't any. With the result that she tells lies already in a delightful way.

I talk to her about life.

"What do you buy things with?" she asks me.

"With money."

"Where do you get money from?"

"You go to people that you know and say to them that they ought to give you money because if they don't you'll tell everyone that they're thieves. So they give it to you."

"And if they don't want to?"

"You hit them."

"But suppose they get cross."

"No, they don't get cross. People like being hit."

"But it hurts."

"That's why. You must always hurt people. Then people think that you like them. You say to them, you're a filthy swine."

"Are you a filthy swine?"

"Of course."

"And aunt Charlotte?"

"She is too."

And note that my triumph lay already in the fact that on the surface it was barely obvious. Madame Masure came:

“Do you love me, Marthe?”

“Yes,” said Marthe.

And Madame Masure purred with joy. Now, for Marthe, loving someone means hurting them. When she answers yes, it means that she wants to hurt Madame Masure: or perhaps she doesn't want to, dear little heart, but because of my teaching she answers yes when she means no. Isn't that so? Invulnerable, I think. Unless the system is stronger than me. Sometimes I wonder. From time to time Marthe makes gestures that alarm me. The other day for example, spontaneously, she gave me a sweet. Then I smiled. Then she kicked me on the leg because I've persuaded her that when someone looks at her and smiles it's because they're laughing at her. From now on she'll never give anyone a sweet again. But in the meantime the gesture was there. Where did it come from? Go and find out. From Madame Masure perhaps? She is so crafty. So I had to take steps.

“You know, Marthe, the big cow's going to come soon. . .”

Because I've taught her also to say ‘big cow’ instead of grandmother—but only when Madame Masure comes on her own. I think that's rather clever, don't you? Madame Masure was amazed. I said to her:

“Big cow? But you must have been dreaming. Where could that child have found such a word? You're getting delusions.”

She didn't dare insist. Perhaps she really believed that as you get older you get delusions. She must be worried.

“Big cow's going to come. You'll say to her. . .”

Madame Masure arrived. She put down her box of marzipan. Then said Marthe:

“Daddy says you're a pest coming to see us like this.”

At that she lost her self-control. She raised her hand. I rushed forward.

“ Laying hands on my child ! ”

“ But did you hear what she said ? ”

“ Well, no, you know that children always tell the truth.”

Then she began to cry. Marthe went up to her, dear little thing.

“ Are you crying, big cow ? ”

Madame Masure said ‘ Oh ’ (a short, clipped Oh, that I should have written o/). She got up. She left, with her mouth creased up like a monkey’s behind, she was trying so hard not to cry. While Marthe dipped into the marzipan. The next day Masure tried to approach me. But he was like Dugommier’s lawyer; he hardly believed in what he was saying.

“ She’s never been able to take a joke,” I told him.

He laughed, happily.

“ Yes, that’s true.”

But all the same they didn’t come back again.

“ Why doesn’t Aunt Charlotte come any more ? ”

“ Because she’s been put in prison.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because she told the truth.”

On the contrary, Rose comes often. Marthe loves her very much and I am in favour of this affection. Because Rose is always the same. Because she is still full of indifference which is as solid as a rock. I would like Marthe to be like her. Here I am, typing. I can hear them talking. Then we put Marthe down in front of some toys and we go into the bedroom. Rose takes her jumper off.

“ What breasts ! ” she says. “ Have you ever seen any others like them ? ”

She caresses them with nostalgia.

“ To think that one day all this will be buried in the ground.”

For a time Elise came too. Not very regularly. Sometimes two days running, then not at all for three months.

“I came to see how Marthe was.”

Always the Measure-system. To be on one side. To talk on one side. Because you can imagine whether Elise cares tuppence about Marthe. Because she's thinking of something else. Then in the end, she stopped coming. And it's better like that. At the beginning too, I sometimes answered advertisements of the matrimonial or similar types. Because there too, there's a rich, shadowy, strange world where it would be worthwhile fishing. I would find some good stories to tell. But I've given that up too. There is still Marthe. There are the two of us, our little life, our little planet. Which moves continually farther and farther away.









